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“A DOGGED RESOLVE”:
THE DOCTRINE AND DECLINE OF MORMON PLURAL MARRIAGE, 1841-1890

A Thesis Presented
by
JACLYN THORNOCK GADD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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History Program

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JACLYN THORNOCK GADD

Approved as to style and content by

Roberta L. Wollons, Professor
Chairperson of Committee

Julie P. Winch, Professor
Member

Benjamin D. Johnson, Associate Professor
Member

Elizabeth McCahill, Program Director
History Program

Timothy Hacsí, Chairperson
History Department

ABSTRACT

A DOGGED RESOLVE: THE DOCTRINE AND DECLINE OF MORMON PLURAL MARRIAGE, 1841-1890

December 2020

Jaclyn Thornock Gadd, B.A., Utah State University
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Professor Roberta L. Wollons

A Dogged Resolve is an analytical micro-history of the theology and marital practices among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1841 to 1890. In the spring of 1841, Joseph Smith, Church founder and leader, took another wife; an act which launched a long and controversial practice of polygamy by a small minority within the community. After the Latter-day Saints migrated west, the isolation of the Rocky Mountains fostered a period where plural families could thrive and the first generation endeavored to establish marital norms. However, with advancements in technology and transportation, the younger generations adopted nineteenth century attitudes toward marriage and the practice of plural marriage did not achieve a lasting acceptance. Polygamy disturbed a general public locked in Christian monogamy, and its presence on American shores galvanized opponents to challenge every petition by the territory of Utah for statehood and the citizenship of every person who not only practiced polygamy, but believed in or supported the idea. By the 1880s

and with the affirmation of United States Supreme Court rulings and Congressional legislation, the federal government relentlessly prosecuted and convicted hundreds of polygamists while successfully stripping the community of voting and other constitutional rights. For members of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, an attack on one principle was an attack on all. The external opposition actually prodded the Saints to staunchly defend plural marriage even though they were already content to let the practice fade on its own.

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To the Bennion Family Association, thank you for entrusting me to share a small portion of Samuel and John Bennion's story. They were remarkable men and I am honored to have any sort of association with the Bennion lineage. Special thanks must be given to the archival institutions who offered generous assistance to my research; namely, Daughters of Utah Pioneers, the Church History Library from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Digital Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library of Brigham Young University. For assistance in shaping my topic and argument, I turned to Dr. Kathleen Flake of the University of Virginia, who helped me to refine my idea and tighten my argument. I also thank Dr. Anthony Sweat of Brigham Young University for permission to use his painting of Joseph and Emma Smith and for his kind encouragement.

Several individuals were patient and supportive during the long transformation of this thesis. I could never have attempted such a task had it not been for their tireless encouragement. To my mother, my siblings, my children and to the Gadd family, I love you and I thank you. Last but not least, to my father, who passed before this project's completion and to who I owe my love of history, you are always in my heart.

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PREFACE

This thesis is the product of years of passive inquiry and a recent genealogical discovery. Like many other active women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I cherish our church's history and culture but keep at arm's length its nineteenth century experimentation with plural marriage.¹ It is not a frequent subject of discussion in Sunday School or around the dinner table. Not until conducting research for a graduate Family History course did I encounter a deeper connection, closer to home. In my own family tree, a maternal ancestor, Samuel Bennion, I learned was a polygamist, marrying as many as five wives. Samuel will be highlighted later, but the discovery opened a vault of questions too imperative for me to ignore.

The initial approach to this project centered around the value of objectivity. I felt it absolutely necessary to compartmentalize "self" and "subject" in the shaping of my argument and research. Any serious scholar, I reasoned, must separate the two spheres for risk of subconsciously inserting personal bias. As one with skin in the game, any evidence of partiality would surely undermine my efforts and my credibility. After a recommended study of John Putnam Demos and his theories on Insider/Outsider research with the use of self as an asset, not a liability, I came to realize the value of my position as a Latter-day Saint

¹ The preferred name for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is member of the Church of Jesus Christ, member of the restored Church of Jesus Christ or Latter-day Saint. In the nineteenth century, the terms "Mormons," "Mormon Church" and "Mormonism" were used as epithets and have remained popular nicknames throughout the years. I will utilize the term "Mormon" when referencing historical expressions or context and acknowledge their preference and intend no provocation.

woman.² As one who studies the doctrine and lives its principles, I am knitted together to those who lived the Principle (plural marriage) and also able to offer the perspective of a modern member of the community. This was not a random topic selection but clearly, in the words of Demos, “inextricably rooted in self.”³

My draw to the history of Mormon polygamy can be linked to years of confrontation and inquiry from well-meaning yet misinformed individuals outside the community. It has cast a dormant shadow in the halls of my faith and I felt compelled to discover for myself what happened. Confronting the past, however unpleasant, meant coming to terms with an uncomfortable particle of my religious self-identity. My objective was never to excuse the practice but to create meaning and understanding of the experience while accounting for human behavior. This intentional approach fostered a narrative that instinctively looked beyond the noise of justification and into the acute moments of Church history. John Demos teaches us to “use history as an opportunity to confront life’s deepest challenges.”⁴ This piece was my encounter with the past as a means to address the challenges of the present.

² John Putnam Demos, “Using Self, Using History.” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (2002): 37–42, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700781>. John Putnam Demos is an American author and historian whose work masterfully connects self and subject. After investigating his own ancestor’s participation in the Salem witch trials, Demos paved the way for other researchers, such as myself, to not only navigate historical research of a personal nature but to use that connection as a tool to build bridges between the past and the present.

³ Demos, 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

INTRODUCTION

The following article titled, “What Papers Say,” was published in 1890 by the *New York Herald*, and reprinted in the Church owned and operated newspaper, the *Deseret News*:

The official action taken by the Mormon Church yesterday, prohibiting ‘marriage in violation of the law of the land,’ is an event of paramount importance to Utah and of exceptional interest to the nation. It is an unconditional surrender to the power of the United States and marks the end of a contest that has been long and determined on both sides.⁵

The article referred to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints belief and practice of the plurality of wives. In late 1890, after an exhausting power struggle between the federal government and the Church, then Church President, Wilford Woodruff, presented a manifesto to the common body of the Saints that called for the cessation of new plural marriages in Utah. To those outside the community, such a proposal was viewed as a step in “the right direction by recognizing the supremacy of civil rulers in public affairs.”⁶

To members of the nineteenth century restored Church of Jesus Christ, President Woodruff’s declaration signified the official end of a lengthy and collective resistance. The practice of plural marriage among the early Latter-day Saints, or Saints, remains a compelling chapter in Church history, indeed in many divisions of academia. Despite thorough documentation by contemporaries and scholars alike, little attention has been directed to the doctrine of the Church and its impact on the steady decline of polygamy. Neither has the Church ideology been attributed to member behavior and its collaborative

⁵ “What Papers Say,” *Deseret News*, October 25, 1890, accessed Nov. 23, 2020, <https://lib.byu.edu/collections/the-deseret-news/>.

⁶ “What Papers Say.”

resistance during the federal opposition period of the 1880s. This study endeavors to link the doctrine behind the practice to both its gradual decline and its fervent defense in response to determined outside pressure.

Polygamy was practiced and sanctioned among the Saints from 1841 until 1890, however, the primary sources studied here are mainly from the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. Other materials from earlier or later decades are presented to provide evidence of contrasting rhetoric used by Church leaders in teaching about the principle of plural marriage and its perception and experience throughout the Latter-day Saint community. These sources come from non-elite members and Church leadership and consist of letters, diaries, family records, interviews, Church journals, discourses and sermons. They have been analyzed with a focus on the purpose of plural marriage, as the Saints and leaders understood it to be, and its doctrinal evolution over time. Attention has been directed to changing attitudes toward romantic love and marriage, counsel and instruction from over the pulpit, and plural marriage behavioral expectations.

A central argument is that the Church doctrine shifted from plural marriage as a prerequisite for attaining the highest exaltation in the hereafter to one way to receive an eternal, celestial reward. Sermons from leaders in the 1850s and 1860s are filled with references to personal sacrifice and Old Testament blessings for those who entered into the plurality of wives. Instruction from Church authorities in later decades became more ambiguous in regard to the difference in heavenly rewards between polygamous and

monogamous unions. From 1853 to 1886 a periodical known as the *Journal of Discourses* was published in England and addressed contemporary life within the Church of Jesus Christ, in particular those of a doctrinal nature. As plural marriage was a central tenet to the religious ideology, it was a much spoken of and written about topic. Church leaders, who were polygamous husbands themselves, filled the *Journal of Discourses*' (JOD) pages with admonishments, doctrinal meanings and policy clarifications.⁷ This source, with its sermons by Church leaders, provides reference points for the theological evolution of plural marriage.

The historian Lawrence Foster, a widely cited source for his work on sexuality and Latter-day Saint religious history, wrote, "Few aspects of Mormon polygamy have been more controversial than its impact on women."⁸ How the women, especially plural wives, responded over the years and approached their roles within polygamy is also an important component of my research. A major voice for women's concerns on a sprawling range of topics, including plural marriage, was the newspaper, the *Woman's Exponent*. An unofficial publication of the Church but with the backing and blessing of Brigham Young (Church President), the *Woman's Exponent* was one of the first women's newspapers in the country.⁹ Published from 1872 to 1914, the women of the *Exponent* aspired "to speak on every topic of current interest, and on every subject as it arises in which the women of Utah, and the great sisterhood the world over, are specially interested."¹⁰ The *Woman's Exponent* was the de

⁷ Gary Wyatt, "Mormon Polygyny in the Nineteenth Century: A Theoretical Analysis," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 20, no. 1 (1989): 17, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41601991>.

⁸ Lawrence Foster, "Polygamy and the Frontier: Mormon Women in Early Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 269, accessed May 25, 2020, https://issuu.com/utah10/docs/uhq_volume50_1982_number3/66.

⁹ Christine Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852-1890* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 65.

¹⁰ "The Woman's Exponent," accessed May 20, 2020, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/WomanExp/id/963/>.

facto voice of Utah women: single, monogamous, polygamous, non-elite, and public figure. It has been examined for documentation of women's approach to living the principle of polygamy and their adapting attitudes toward marriage, especially those from the younger generations. Though women were among polygamy's staunchest supporters during the territorial discord of the 1880s, their evolving views and failed efforts to socialize into polygamous norms contributed to its decline.

Additional sources come from individual accounts such as diaries, letters and other personal writings. From these materials there is further evidence of a shift in Church doctrine and in the attitudes of both young women and young men toward marriage. After 1860, the Church appears to have adjusted the high priority previously placed on polygamous over monogamous marriages. For example, in 1862, a young woman wrote to Brigham Young, seeking advice on whether or not she should marry an older, married man or a younger bachelor. She was advised to marry the latter.¹¹ And in the diary of Mary Lois Walker Morris compiled in the book, *Before the Manifesto: The Life Writings of Mary Lois Walker Morris*, Mrs. Morris writes of the opinions of two of her children when confronted with plural marriage. Though the progeny of a polygamous marriage, her son and daughter both expressed disdain for the institution. Addie, the daughter, was so horrified when she learned that her husband had taken another wife without telling her that she pulled some of her hair out.¹²

¹¹ Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 315.

¹² Milewski and Melissa Lambert Milewski, *Before the Manifesto: The Life Writings of Mary Lois Walker Morris* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007), 202–3.

Taken together, these sources reveal a compelling story of how plural marriage evolved in the religious and social contexts of its practitioners. That its demise was hastened by opposition in the form of disenfranchisement and other violations of constitutional rights of American citizens has been argued by historians and scholars. This study's academic contribution is to show how doctrinal and ideological evolution translated into an institutional decline before the federal and state pressure of the 1880s. These sources will also reveal how the doctrine precipitated the Saints' resistance to outside anti-polygamy opposition. As will be discussed in the next section, scholarly treatment of plural marriage before the 1880s already recognizes a decrease in the practice but there has been little analysis of Church teachings coupled with social attitudes. This collection of sources illustrates how the changing values of the common members and the approaches of Church leadership in teaching the doctrine contributed to its gradual decline and zealous advocacy.

The historiography of Mormon polygamy for decades was mainly comprised of themes that focus on the contributions of influential figures, mainly men of Anglo-Saxon descent. A 1980 article, "*The Gentle Tamers Revisited*" by Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, challenged the history of women in the American west to be viewed with a multicultural, gender-inclusive approach and not solely through the lens of masculine, manifest destiny. Thereafter, the scholarship saw more works by women historians and about the plural wives themselves which complicated the traditional narrative. Much of the pre-

1980s literature centered on prominent men from Mormon history such as Brigham Young and Joseph Smith.

Following Miller and Jensen's clarion call to adjust the sightlines, topics centered around and involving women became more prevalent in the scholarship. Themes such as divorce, enfranchisement, infertility, social and economic status, and yes, even feminism were studied and dissected in the context and from the perspective of plural wives. A piece from era that reflects the movement is Professor Carol Cornwall Madsen's "At Their Peril: Utah Law and the case of Plural Wives, 1850-1900," published in the *Western Historical Quarterly*, in 1990. Madsen concentrates on the impact of Utah's domestic relations laws on plural wives and their vulnerability to criminal prosecution and legal discrimination during the 1870s and 1880s. In the beginning, Utah's territorial laws were formulated to accommodate plural marriage (a practice that involved roughly 25 percent of Utah's non-native residents).¹³ Utah marriage law was meant to protect the rights of the minority and in subsequent works, historians worked to understand other gaps in the narrative related to women.

Historian Lawrence Foster contributed to the conversation with his book, *Religion and Sexuality: Three Communal Experiments of the 19th Century*, (1984) and his articles, "A Little-Known Defense of Polygamy," (1974) and "Polygamy and the Frontier: Mormon Women in Early Utah" (1982). In all three publications, Foster elaborates on traditional sex roles and conventional marriage patterns and their disruption by the early Mormons.

¹³ Carol Cornwall Madsen, "At Their Peril: Utah Law and the Case of Plural Wives, 1850 -1900," in *Women and Gender in the American West*, ed. Mary Ann Irwin and James F. Brooks (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 2004, 37–52.

Especially in *Religion and Sexuality*, do we find the formulative experience of Joseph Smith and the impact of plural marriage on the leader and his followers. Here, Foster presents a sociological explanation for the introduction of polygamy and its success in light of their objectives. Widely cited by other scholars on the subject, Foster argued that compared to other women in polygamous cultures and contrary to the prevailing opinion, plural wives enjoyed more freedom in terms of divorce and marriage.¹⁴ Other scholars would add that plural wives were the precursors to modern feminists with their control over household economies, participation in occupations and activities outside the home and the early enfranchisement of Utah women (1870).

For decades, historians have conducted comparative and quantitative studies of different Latter-day Saint communities throughout the Intermountain West. Some have focused on the quality of relationships within plural families such as Kimball Young in *Isn't One Wife Enough* (1954) and Jessie Embry in *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (1987). Others sought for accurate figures on divorce rates using family group sheets, which are ancestral records used by Church members and submitted to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Philip R. Kunz, in "One Wife or Several? A Comparative Study of Late Nineteenth-Century Marriage in Utah" (1980) studied only the hard data without a legal and religious context.

One study that utilized entry-level specifics to interpret the nature of plural marriage is Kathryn M. Daynes's *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840 – 1910* (2001). By narrowing the focus to families in a single community over

¹⁴ Foster, "Polygamy and the Frontier: Mormon Women in Early Utah," 196.

an extended period of time, Daynes's results were consciously acquired because of the boundaries applied to her data search. Unlike earlier quantitative, community studies that were limited as regards the time frame or based on incomplete data, in her book Daynes is able to clarify questions on whether the number of women entering plural marriage decreased or increased over time, the types of women who entered plural marriage and the social context of Utah divorce law. Because personal accounts as well as oral interviews especially with elites and the educated are overrepresented, a complete data set from one community is almost impossible.¹⁵ Daynes's approach and findings, though not a collective representation of the entire Latter-day Saint population, reveal more than personal insights and attitudes into the relationship quality within polygamous families and have since been referenced extensively in other academic works.

Shortly after the data mining of Daynes, another seminal piece emerged that studied the constitutional conflict the issue of polygamy presented in America. Sarah B. Gordon's *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in 19th Century America* (2002) examines the basic motivations for the anti-polygamy movement across the nation in the 1870s and 1880s. Gordon also expands upon Carol C. Madsen's essay about the legal and social vulnerabilities plural wives had to endure during the period of federal prosecution. A fundamental position used by the Church in defending their practice of plural marriage was that the institution was safeguarded by the First Amendment's freedom of religion clause.¹⁶ Gordon details the action/belief distinction in connection to the Free Exercise Clause as

¹⁵ Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 8-9.

¹⁶ Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 115.

interpreted by the United States Supreme Court as well as the ensuing federal legislation enacted by Congress.

The past twenty years have produced works with a focus on Church founder Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo, Illinois period when the Saints temporarily established headquarters along the Mississippi before migrating to the Rocky Mountains. George D. Smith's "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-46: A Preliminary Demographic Report" (2001) and Brian Hale's "Joseph Smith's Personal Polygamy" (2012) examine historical records to discern which personal behaviors of Joseph Smith and other Church leaders were consistent with critical assessments penned by anti-Mormons and skeptics of the time. George Smith centers his argument around a recent study of the evolution of human sexuality which concludes that while modern man is often culturally obliged to be monogamous, he is biologically predisposed to polygamy.¹⁷ The beginnings of plural marriage in Nauvoo have been misunderstood for their secrecy and lack of reliable records, but George Smith follows the steps of how the institution evolved from first introduction, before Joseph Smith's death and its evolution from private practice to accepted marital system that survived long after the Mormons moved West.

More recently, Merina Smith, in her book *Revelation, Resistance and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830-1853* (2013), extends the movement to look at the roots of Mormon polygamy while attempting to answer the question of why the Saints accepted the practice when they had been taught to value romantic

¹⁷ George D. Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-46: A Preliminary Demographic Report*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2001), accessed Mar 18, 2020, http://search.proquest.com/docview/904525252?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo.

love and sexual exclusivity. Smith's premise that nineteenth century marriage had become desacralized into a civil institution which made Church theology all the more radical piggybacks Daynes' argument that the nineteenth century home was woman's domain with the man free to privately carouse. Smith also continues the conversation of the effects of the secrecy in Nauvoo and the rise of a salvation narrative.¹⁸

With Merina Smith's piece came Christine Talbot's, *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852-1890* (2013). Talbot's central theme is about the efforts of nineteenth century American society to define separate spaces for public and private spheres. Nodding to Smith's notion of the unorthodox Latter-day Saint marital system upending the domestic and public confines assigned to men and women, Talbot bases her argument on how the Church of Jesus Christ's political thought challenged Protestant middle-class social norms. Drawing upon contemporary literature of gender roles and U.S. politics, society and culture, Talbot also discusses why Protestants believed that the Saints' sociopolitical system was undermining Republican government. The study considers the ambiguities of plural marriage and how many plural wives saw advantages to the system because it allowed more diversity in selecting a spouse with divorce granted liberally to those who wished it.¹⁹ Like Gordon, Talbot details the 1879 U.S. Supreme Court majority decision in *Reynolds vs U.S.* which stated that polygamy did not fall under the safety net of religious freedom. Her work also examines the wave of opposition and federal intervention that quickly ensued. Challenging early anti-polygamy literature, Talbot confronts negative

¹⁸ Merina Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830-1853* (Logan: USU Press, 2013), 7, 59.

¹⁹ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 20.

stereotypes the rest of the country assigned to polygamists and to members of the Church. An 1856 Republican party presidential campaign slogan proclaimed that the two great evils in America were “slavery and polygamy,” and Americans invoked class and racial bias that perpetuated the notion that the Latter-day Saints were poor immigrants who were overrunning the United States.²⁰ Talbot explains the complicated paradox of women in the Church which has also been addressed by other scholars in the past ten years, 2010 to the present. Indeed, the dichotomy of Utah women’s enfranchisement and the assumed suppression of plural marriage is a mainstay of recent scholarship.

While Talbot wrote of the opportunities that plural marriage could create for wives, Paula Harline warned of extending toleration or legal protection to polyamory or polygamous relationships without considering the obscure nineteenth century plural wives whose lives she documents in her book, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women* (2014). Another collection of personal accounts this piece may be, but Harline constructs a persuasive argument that counters Daynes’s and Talbot’s writing of polygyny’s far-sighted feminism. Harline’s work reveals two common themes throughout the personal writings of her subjects. 1. Wives never found polygamy easy and rarely found it pleasant. 2. Conflict management existed for family cohesiveness’s sake, but at the end of the day, plural marriage was not exactly the type of environment that fostered female community, independence and feminism. There is no debate as to the motivations and morality of Church founder and polygamist Joseph Smith, as Harline confines her narrative to the personal writings of 29 women. Polygamous marriages were not a one-size-fits-all on

²⁰ Talbot, 18.

the spectrum of human experience and emotion and Harline's most substantial contribution to the dialogue is her candid questioning of how America should consider nineteenth century Mormon polygamy today and if enlightened society should allow consenting, contemporary adults to have the liberty to decide the composition of marital relationships.

Tarrying in the sphere of personal history analysis, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870* (2017), highlights the everyday lives of nineteenth century plural wives, but includes accounts of the husbands. Through a vast compilation of diaries, letters, journals, minute-books, quilts, scrapbooks and other common material, Ulrich seeks to answer how the enfranchisement of women in Utah was a product of their peculiar marital arrangements and details how the women advocated for both suffrage and polygamy. By emphasizing the experimentation of plural marriage, Ulrich exposes the paradox of polygamy as both a liberating force and a deeply troubling experience. In the thick of it are human stories of a people drawn to a new Christian religion that could only have succeeded but for the women. "Mormonism, like other religious movements, flourished because it attracted strong women."²¹

Excellent scholarship facilitated the stepping stones for this thesis. Merina Smith's work on the roots of polygamy in Nauvoo sets the religious context of its origin and the role of a salvation narrative within Church doctrine. Kathryn Daynes's study of plural marriages within a specific Latter-day Saint community establishes a framework of social and marital behaviors. Sarah B. Gordon expounds upon the legal and legislative history between the

²¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 13.

United States government and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, highlighting the intense opposition of the 1880s. Christine Talbot explains the driving force behind anti-polygamist activities against the Church and the social and legal advantages plural marriage could offer its practitioners. Paula Harline and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich open the windows into the internal identity struggles of the men and women caught in the middle and build a bridge between their experience in the nineteenth century and marriage in the twenty-first century. This thesis fills an analytical gap in the historiography by exploring the doctrinal shifts and the modernization of marital attitudes in relation to plural marriage.

CHAPTER 1

AN OVERVIEW OF POLYGAMY

Time was when, in the popular mind, Mormonism meant only polygamy.

Stanley S. Ivins

The early American republic was an electric era that sent American Christianity cascading into different creative directions. Inspired by their revolution, Americans began to think about the religious wants of the common people with a growing populist movement that further distinguished the United States from other modern, industrial democracies. Religious outsiders, independent of the normal, denominational frameworks, attracted large followings based on democratic principles of self-determination and freedom of thought.²²

Joseph Smith, founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was one such religious outsider who appealed to non-elites as a Christian who “accessed heaven through the back door.”²³ As a fourteen year old boy in 1820, Smith claimed that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him in a grove of trees near his family’s Palmyra, New York farm. Raised in the middle of a religious revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening, Smith recorded that “during this time of great excitement, my mind was called

²² Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Connecticut ; London, England: Yale University Press, 1989), 5.

²³ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 13.

up to serious reflection.”²⁴ Influenced by the budding concept of moral agency in contrast to the traditional Calvinist doctrine of pre-destination, Smith and members of his family investigated the different denominations in an effort to align themselves with the true church of Jesus Christ.²⁵ Confused and dispirited at the different parties’ “war of words and tumult of opinions,” he felt impressed to bypass the conventional means of obtaining wisdom and go straight to the source. In the spring of 1820, he “retired to the woods” in order to ask God “which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join.”²⁶ This pattern of directly asking God Smith would come to employ as Church president again and again and teach his congregants to implement in their own lives. In an account that would be referred to as “The First Vision,” he later wrote that he was instructed by God the Father and Jesus Christ that he “must join none of them, for they were all wrong.”²⁷ Over the next decade until the official organization of The Church of Jesus Christ on April 6, 1830, Smith and his visions and revelations would “give rise to the largest religion ever founded on American soil.”²⁸

Nicknamed after their foundational text, the “Mormons” and their missionaries caused a stir among Protestant revivalists with their new doctrines on personal revelation, the priesthood, the nature of God, marriage, family and additional scripture to accompany the Bible, The Book of Mormon. Almost immediately the Latter-day Saint community experienced local persecution that would drive them from New York, to Ohio, to Missouri, to Illinois and then finally west to the Rocky Mountains.

²⁴ *Joseph Smith - History*, 1:8.

²⁵ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 109.

²⁶ *Joseph Smith - History*, 1:13-18.

²⁷ *Joseph Smith - History*, 1:19.

²⁸ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 19.

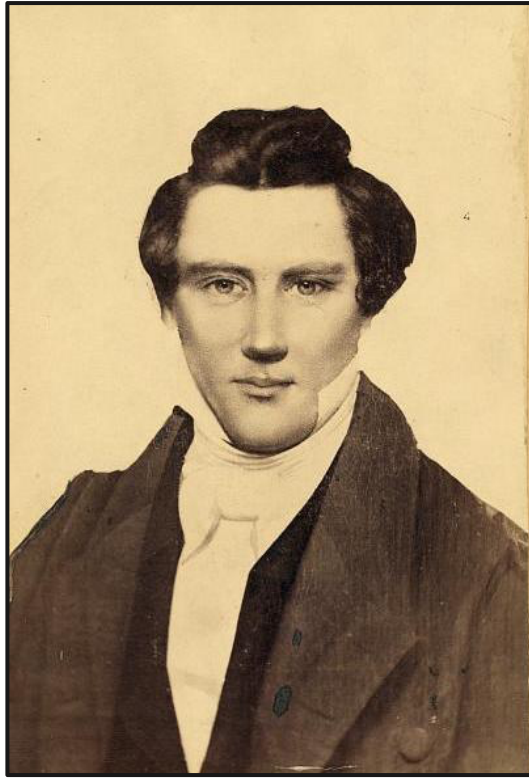


Figure 1. *Joseph Smith*. Photograph by W. B. Carson, 1879. Miscellaneous Items in High Demand Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. LC-DIG-ppmsca-19968. The image is not an actual photograph of Joseph Smith, but a photo of a portrait drawing or painting.

A New Revelation

During their relatively safe but temporary stay in Nauvoo, Illinois, from 1839 to 1846, Joseph Smith introduced sacred ordinances or rituals essential to attaining exaltation in the next life. Among these rituals was the sealing of husbands and wives for time and eternity and not just “’til death us do part.”²⁹ Coupled with this new doctrine on the eternal nature of marriage was a revelation on the plurality of wives. Church historians and scholars have differed over Joseph’s knowledge of God’s commandment to live the law of polygyny or

²⁹ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 25.

polygamy, as it is commonly called. Nonetheless, it is believed during the Kirtland, Ohio period, in 1831, while Joseph was studying and amending the Bible, that he questioned why some Old Testament prophets, Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, married more than one wife at a time.³⁰ According to Smith, and in conjunction with other doctrines and practices he had introduced, the principle of plural marriage came in answer to an inquiry.

This thesis will not elaborate on the exact time and place of the first command to Joseph Smith to take on more wives. Additionally, the initial reactions of the early Saints as well as later polygamy participants post-Nauvoo and leading Church figures such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young will be chronicled in chapter 2. For the sake of presenting a coherent and condensed background on Mormon polygamy, it is sufficient to know that the first plural marriage was performed on April 5th, 1841, in a cornfield outside Nauvoo between Joseph Smith and Louisa Beaman.³¹ Though evidence suggests that there may have been an earlier marriage between Smith and one Fanny Alger in the mid-1830s, records of plural marriage throughout its 65 year existence among the Latter-day Saint community were never public and private accounts on the matter are contradictory.³²

The revelation on the plurality of wives, now section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, another volume of scripture, was recorded on July 12, 1843. Only a handful of the most faithful and devoted members were apprised of the revelation and even fewer were

³⁰ Daynes, 19.

³¹ Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 310, accessed May 24, 2020, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/stable/pdf/45059052.pdf>.

³² Ivins, 310.

asked to live it.³³ Indeed, remaking a marriage system in a culture steeped in Christian monogamy presented challenges that required the utmost secrecy. Code words were used as a cover to deter enemies of the Church from sounding an alarm and public statements of denial were issued in an attempt to assuage the growing anxiety and rumors swirling around Church leadership.³⁴ Klaus J. Hansen argues that Joseph Smith kept plural marriage quiet because he did not believe it safe to openly live or acknowledge its existence until the Church had established a legal and political framework that could protect the practice.³⁵

During the next two years Joseph Smith was “sealed” or married to, by some accounts, as many as 42 wives.³⁶ By the end of the Nauvoo period in 1846, 153 husbands had married 587 women.³⁷ The nature and condition of these “sealings” will be discussed in later chapters, but it is important to note the general willingness of the early Latter-day Saint women to accept the principle of plural marriage as one that “could identify the Saints as a peculiar people who had removed themselves from the mainstream of American culture.”³⁸

Nonetheless, despite moderate success in Nauvoo, the rumors and gossip continued to swirl as disaffected members and indignant locals set in motion a series of events that would end with the Saints driven from Nauvoo and their leader dead. Prominent dissidents who opposed the prophet’s growing political and economic power and knew first hand of his and

³³ Phillip R. Kunz, “One Wife or Several? A Comparative Study of Late Nineteenth-Century Marriage in Utah,” in *The Mormon People: Their Character and Traditions*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980).

³⁴ Jessie L. Embry and Lois Kelley, “Polygamous and Monogamous Mormon Women: A Comparison,” in *Women in Utah History*, ed. Patricia Lyn Scott, Linda Thatcher, and Susan Allred Whetstone, *Paradigm Or Paradox?* (University Press of Colorado, 2005), 3.

³⁵ Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 157.

³⁶ Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-46,” 131.

³⁷ Smith, 152.

³⁸ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 157.

others' practice of plural marriage, organized a separate church and published a scathing exposé in the first and only edition of the newspaper the *Nauvoo Expositor* in June of 1844.³⁹ The mayor of Nauvoo, who happened to be Joseph Smith, along with the Nauvoo City Council declared the newspaper a public nuisance and ordered its destruction. The decision only escalated tensions within the city while the surrounding communities and the governor of Illinois were dragged into the conflict. Governor Thomas Ford demanded that Smith go to the county seat of Carthage and stand trial for the destruction of property. A few weeks later, while detained in the Carthage jail, a mob of men stormed the prison and Joseph and his brother Hyrum were killed.⁴⁰

Plural Marriage after Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith's death did not terminate the teaching and practice of polygamy as many former members had hoped nor did it halt the growth of the religious movement as a whole. Under the leadership of Brigham Young, by seniority, and the Twelve Apostles, the remaining months in Nauvoo saw more marriage sealings and the rate of polygamous marriages rose to a point that would not be known again for another ten years.⁴¹ After they ferried themselves, their families and all their worldly possessions across the Mississippi River and slogged through the mud of Iowa, the Saints rested temporarily in the appropriately named encampment of Winter Quarters, Nebraska, along the Missouri River. Encouraged by the thinly populated frontier, the polygamists of Nauvoo and their plural

³⁹ Embry and Kelley, "Polygamous and Monogamous Mormon Women," 3.

⁴⁰ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 33–34.

⁴¹ Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," 311.

wives no longer hid their secret marriages. No plural wife in Nauvoo had taken her husband's name and they did not openly cohabit. Their marriages had only been known to a small circle of Saints and though they were not presented to the community as husband and wife, the husband was expected to assume the role of a provider.⁴² But, the open fields of Iowa and Nebraska cultivated more autonomy and many felt relief in their freedom to openly acknowledge these relationships.⁴³ The apostle Lorenzo Snow wrote, "We felt as tho' we could breathe more freely and speak with one another upon those things wherein God had made us free with less carefulness than we had hitherto done."⁴⁴

Iowa and Nebraska were only intended as mere way stations. Brigham Young had his sights on a permanent location further west in the middle of the Great Basin. This migration period was not a particularly active interval for the development of polygamy as all resources were dedicated to moving a large body of people across the plains, "a feat that was accomplished only through great sacrifice and communal effort."⁴⁵ With a few exceptions, Brigham Young all but ceased performing plural marriages on the trail. There were too many questions to address: financial support, living arrangements, parental responsibilities, inheritance and divorce. Nonetheless, most church leaders were already polygamists and those who had entered into plural marriage had secured themselves within the community of the Saints.⁴⁶

⁴² Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 31.

⁴³ Daynes, 37.

⁴⁴ Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "The Iowa Journal of Lorenzo Snow," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 264, accessed June 19, 2020, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/iowa-journal-lorenzo-snow>.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830-1853*, 310.

⁴⁶ Smith, 213.

In July of 1847, the first wave of Mormon pioneers entered the Salt Lake Valley. Thousands of converts in subsequent years and decades would follow in their footsteps to the place they would call “Zion.” It would be here in the high desert plains and in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains that the Saints would continue their work in building the kingdom of God and structure a society that would accommodate the principle of plural marriage. Without traditions or experience to guide them, polygamists were left to implement their lifestyle by trial and error. Church leaders did not sermonize on the subject until 1852 when, at last, a main body of Saints had come in from the plains.⁴⁷

The Public Announcement

At a large public meeting in the sweltering August heat and at Brigham Young’s request, apostle Orson Pratt delivered the first sermon publicly acknowledging the controversial marital system. Pratt placed Mormon polygamy in a religious and secular framework from which its defenders would draw upon for years. Insisting on its importance to Church doctrine, he urged all members to accept and sustain its implementation. Highlighting the main points of the 1843 revelation from Joseph Smith, Pratt presented the central argument for the practice as a way to provide already created spirits who will inhabit the bodies of mankind to be born into families who would be faithful and raise up seed in righteous homes. Ordained of God and meant to last into the eternities, marriage, particularly plural marriage, was to be the order by which those spirits could come to earth. He also issued a strict warning that it was “not a doctrine....to gratify the carnal lusts and feelings of

⁴⁷ Smith, 210.

man,” but one that went hand in hand to the commandment given to Adam and Eve, “to multiply and replenish the earth.”⁴⁸

The public announcement produced mixed reactions from both insiders and outsiders. Those among the local communities were not in the least shocked. One congregant later recorded of “the great joy of the saints who have looked forward...for the time to come when we could publicly declare the...greatest principles of our holy religion.”⁴⁹ In contrast, when the sermon was read to the Saints in London later that December, the reader later commented that, “No doubt many would be offended and deny the Faith.” As if predicting his own future, he and others present at that first reading eventually left the church.⁵⁰ The initial reactions of individuals and American society as a whole to Pratt’s public announcement in 1852 will be explored in the next chapter. It is, however, constructive to understand that opposition to its introduction arose immediately and induced a vitriolic response from a clearly disturbed nation.⁵¹

A Church Court System

Utah would not achieve statehood until 1896 and when Congress made it a territory, courtesy of the Compromise of 1850, the Saints had already established a government that was essentially an extension of the Church organization. With scenes of past displacements still fresh in their minds and their buried dead along the path, the early Latter-day Saint

⁴⁸ Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” *Journal of Discourses* 1 (August 29, 1852): 53–66, Accessed April 24, 2020, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/1857>.

⁴⁹ Embry and Kelley, “Polygamous and Monogamous Mormon Women,” 4.

⁵⁰ Paula K. Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44.

⁵¹ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 34.

settlers were quick to create a court system that would protect their unorthodox institutions, such as polygamy.⁵² Just as in the U.S. court system consisting of lower courts and leading up to the highest, the United States Supreme Court, the court system within the restored Church of Jesus Christ started at the local level, then there was a bishop's court, and ultimately the highest, the First Presidency, which consisted of the President of the Church and his two counselors and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. For the early Saints, there were many advantages to this type of system where costs were kept to a minimum, lawyers were explicitly absent, and the emphasis was on justice rather than precedent and procedure.⁵³

Church courts resolved a wide spectrum of issues: estate settlement, land disputes, divorce, debt collection and conflicts within families, especially polygamous ones. Nineteenth century marriage law in the territory of Utah was an ecclesiastical affair because marriage was considered a religious and not a civil rite. Yet, even with its federally appointed judges, the Church emphasized the jurisdiction of its own court system and the territorial legislature expanded the jurisdiction of probate courts to be parallel to district courts. Judges were selected from among local ecclesiastical leaders and the Utah territorial legislature gave these courts authority over civil and criminal cases.⁵⁴ Thus, by 1852, the same year as the public acknowledgement of the practice of plural marriage, the Church had substantial control over the courts in the territory and by 1865, two-thirds of Utah territorial officials were polygamists themselves.⁵⁵ It was a theocratic nation within a nation with the principle

⁵² Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 40.

⁵³ Daynes, 41.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁵ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 109.

of plural marriage at the center.⁵⁶ In the subsequent decades, the United States government would enact laws and interpret the U.S. Constitution in a manner that would work to undermine a court system designed to protect plural marriage and threaten the very existence of their religion in the process.

Anti-Polygamy Legislation

As early as 1856, four years after the official Church recognition of polygamy, legislation would be introduced to Congress that would federalize marriage law. Reformers and marriage advocates sought to institutionalize American, Christian monogamy in order to force those not meeting Victorians marriage ideals, namely the Latter-day Saints, to align with national norms and expectations. Alarmed at the developing marital mores in Utah, centrists in Washington argued that local control allowing the practice of a system of marriage other than monogamy was as immoral as slavery.⁵⁷

The “twin relics of barbarism,” slavery and polygamy, became entrenched in political thought and their abolition was part of a new Republican party platform.⁵⁸ The connection between slavery and polygamy was a useful partisan tool because it placed two, domestic relations issues at the forefront of the Republican Party’s agenda. By 1856, slavery had long been a frightening and gargantuan problem for America. With the growth of slavery in the western territories, and the disintegration of the Whig party, questions of personal freedom and local sovereignty reached the forefront of national politics. A new party with an anti-

⁵⁶ Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830–1853*, 245.

⁵⁷ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 114.

⁵⁸ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 126.

slavery agenda and its less-controversial partner, anti-polygamy theory, unified the old with the new. Polygamist patriarchs proved easier to condemn than Southern, slave-owners and Republicans capitalized on the two nationally identifiable evils.⁵⁹

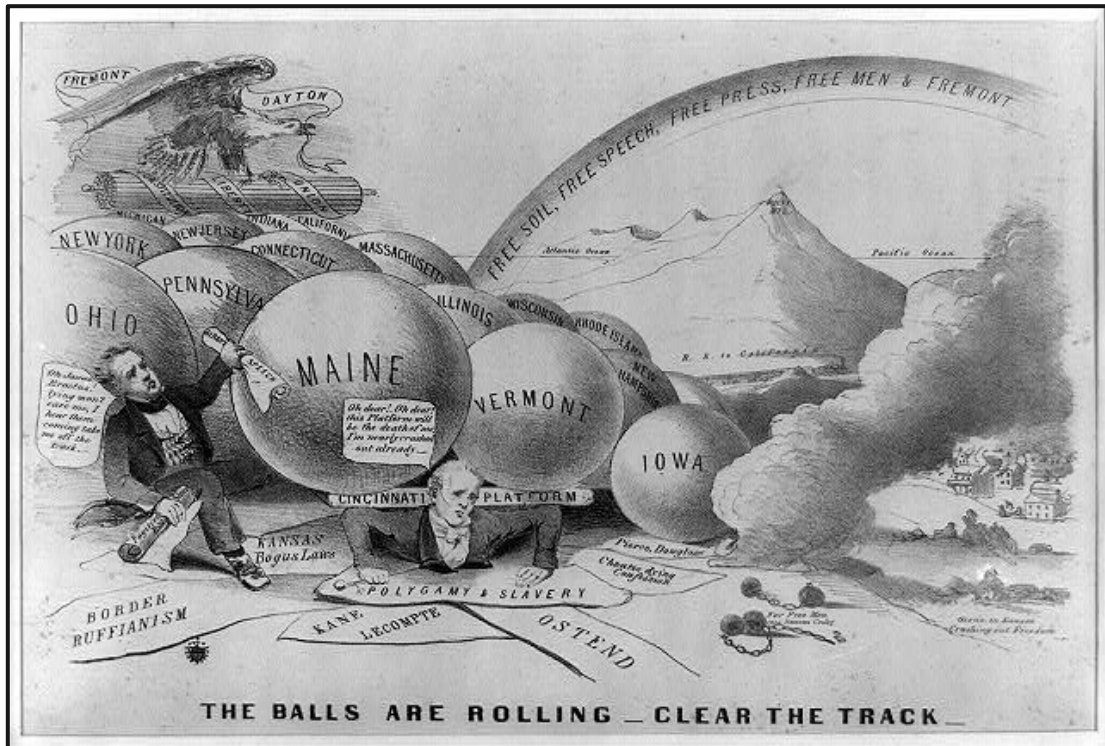


Figure 2. *The Balls are Rolling – Clear the Track*. Created by Nathaniel Currier, 1856. Miscellaneous Items in High Demand Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. LC-DIG-pga-04725. The Republican campaign smear that Fillmore and Buchanan would be crushed by the electoral votes of northern and western states with the issues of “polygamy and slavery” strewn on the ground.

Anti-polygamists were convinced that plural marriage was “not only one of the most ingenious, but is one of the most perfect [practices] that was ever devised to corrupt and

⁵⁹ Gordon, 127.

degrade the holy ordinance of matrimony.”⁶⁰ Polygamy was the catalyst for discussions about the relationship between domestic spheres, American citizenship and government.

In addition, anti-polygamy legislation placed Democratic congressmen in a difficult position. While no one in Congress would debate the social and moral injuries of polygamy, in the beginning, anti-polygamy legislation did receive moderate opposition from Southern Democrats who argued for states’ rights over domestic relations law.⁶¹ Nonetheless, not until Southern Democrats left the Union in 1861 was the path left free for Republicans to reconstruct constitutional theory and allow the expansion of federal power at the expense of local sovereignty. Representative Justin Morrill of Vermont, a young member of Congress who belonged to the reformist wing of the Republican Party, eventually placed his name on the bill that would become the first important anti-polygamy legislation.⁶² Morrill articulated the fundamental argument: “Under the guise of religion this people has established and seek to maintain and perpetuate a Mohammedan barbarism revolting to the civilized world.”⁶³

The Morrill Act for the Suppression Polygamy of 1862 described the practice of polygamy in the territory of Utah as “patriarchal despotism,” and consisted of three sections, each one designed to undermine a component of the Church-controlled legal system. First, it declared bigamy a crime, punishable by a fine of 500 dollars and a five-year prison sentence. Second, it annulled the Utah territorial legislature’s incorporation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and prohibited any religious organization from owning real estate

⁶⁰ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 115.

⁶¹ Talbot, 114.

⁶² Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 144.

⁶³ Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870*, 9.

valued at more than \$50,000.⁶⁴ Also, all territorial legislation enacted to “establish, support, maintain, shield or countenance polygamy,” was declared null and void.⁶⁵

Despite massive political support for the bill, the Morrill Act was not an effective means for deconstructing polygamy because it contained no funding for enforcement and the court system in Utah stayed mostly under the control of the Church. Plural marriages remained out of federal or territorial supervision and convictions were hard to come by because no grand jury of Church members would indict their religious leaders for obeying the tenets of their faith.⁶⁶ Instead, the Morrill Bill was a statement of principle that lacked the support at the local level and ineffective in upsetting a social framework that was designed with legal protection in mind.

Neither President Lincoln, distracted with Civil War and the emancipation of an enslaved people, nor a handful of territorial judges made much effort to enforce the anti-bigamy law. Postwar America was mainly preoccupied with reconstruction in the South but the expansion of gold and silver mining in Utah, the development of anti-polygamist politics in Salt Lake City and the construction of the transcontinental railroad nudged further Congressional action when it became clear that the Morrill Act of 1862 was dead in the water.⁶⁷

In 1866, the House Committee on the Territories held hearings to discuss “the Mormon Question” but any initiatives to eradicate the evils of polygamy went nowhere.

⁶⁴ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 184.

⁶⁵ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 115.

⁶⁶ Talbot, 115.

⁶⁷ Richard D. Poll, “The Legislative Antipolygamy Campaign,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 112, accessed June 24, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43042251>.

Three years later, in 1869, an Indiana Republican named George W. Julian proposed a plan to “discourage polygamy in Utah by granting the right of suffrage to the women of that territory.”⁶⁸ His and others’ reasoning was that if plural wives were afforded the right to vote, they would rise up in opposition against their husbands and tear down a system that meant only to degrade and oppress women. It also died in a committee of the House but not before the Utah territorial legislature embraced the idea and passed a bill granting women the right to vote. At the time, females in Utah were a slight majority of the territory’s 86,000 non-native residents.⁶⁹ The country held its collective breath on the assumption that if Utah women were empowered, they would eliminate polygamy. No one predicted how women, especially the plural wives themselves, would stand and fiercely defend it. Noted one reporter from New Jersey, “And what is the use of woman suffrage if it is to be used to bolster up an institution so degrading to the sex and demoralizing to society?”⁷⁰

Stand and defend it they did. On January 13, 1870, some 3,000 to 4,000 Latter-day Saint women came together in Salt Lake City for a mass demonstration of “indignation.” In a publicity move and a well-organized meeting to protest growing national opposition and another piece of federal legislation aimed at dismantling plural marriage, prominent female leaders boldly denounced their opponents and federal overreach. A stunned nation read reports of “infatuated females” desperately pleading for an institution so distasteful to “women of finer feelings,” and were ultimately led to the conclusion that “the women were as strongly attached to their peculiar and unpopular faith as the men can be.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Poll, 112.

⁶⁹ Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870*, 10.

⁷⁰ Ulrich, 10.

⁷¹ Ibid., 10.

For anti-polygamists, the fervor of plural wives in Utah could only be quelled with further legislative action that would also undercut the authority of the Church-led courts. The Poland Act of 1874 further extended the reach of federal power into its territories by reducing the powers of the territory's probate judges and requiring jury pools to be selected only by the U.S. marshal or his territorial counterpart.⁷² The act removed a general immunity that Church leaders had known since the exodus to Utah and as soon as it took effect, federal prosecutors descended on Utah. Territorial delegate and apostle George Q. Cannon was arrested and Church leadership swiftly recognized the necessity of protecting their own from harassment and humiliation.⁷³

Originally viewed as a failure to ward off critics and opponents of polygamy and the Church, the Poland Act hastened the erosion of the legal control of the Church. Moreover, it opened the door for appeals of polygamy convictions to the U.S. Supreme Court. A younger and lesser known defendant would be ideal, one who wouldn't create a scandal or attract negative attention to the case. One who would belie the popular image so common in anti-polygamist literature of the time, that of libidinous old men forcing young and virtuous women into matrimony.⁷⁴ The diary entry for George Reynolds, secretary to Brigham Young, on October 16, 1874 reads, "It had been decided to bring a test case of the law of 1862...before the court and...to present my name before the grand jury."⁷⁵ Reynolds, a thirty-two year old bookkeeper who had only taken a second wife the year before, was the

⁷² Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 246.

⁷³ Gordon, 250.

⁷⁴ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 84.

⁷⁵ Journal entry, vol. 5, 16 October 1874, George Reynolds, Journal, vols. 1, 3-6, Latter-day Saints Historical Archives (quoted in Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, [Chapel Hill, 2002], 250).

ideal candidate to present before the highest court. He was loyal to his ecclesiastical leaders and without prominent standing within the community.⁷⁶ One year later, in October 1875, Reynolds was indicted for polygamy and convicted under the Morrill Act of 1862. As hoped, the Utah Supreme Court upheld the ruling and the opportunity to prove the unconstitutionality of anti-polygamy legislation before the United States Supreme Court followed three years later.⁷⁷

The United States Supreme Court Ruling

Before their arrival in Utah, the Saints had petitioned Washington for aid many times when their constitutional rights, they argued, had been violated by state and local officials. Predictably, national politicians were reluctant to intervene and the early Latter-day Saints were told to look to the states for justice. Even those who sympathized with the hardships of a religious minority reasoned that religious freedom of individual citizens was a local and not a national matter.⁷⁸ By the 1880s, the isolation of the Rocky Mountains and the Church controlled court structure no longer seemed sufficient to offer the legal and social protection necessary to sustain plural marriage. Staring into the face of more anti-polygamy legislation and with ever growing, national opposition, Church leaders changed their tactics and hitched their wagons to the U.S. Supreme Court's constitutional interpretations.⁷⁹

Reynolds v. United States was argued in November of 1878 and became the first polygamy prosecution to ever reach the Supreme Court, and the first to determine a provision

⁷⁶ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 252.

⁷⁷ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 148.

⁷⁸ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 239.

⁷⁹ Gordon, 255.

of the First Amendment in the law. Both the government and the defense each understood the gravity of the case. Also at stake was the question of whether or not national intervention in local, domestic affairs violated the Constitution.⁸⁰ Reynolds and his attorneys invoked the Free Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment as well as the Church's claim to local self-determination, free from the interference of a central government against the rights of those on the periphery.⁸¹ The government framed a case solely on the evil of polygamy with its "Oriental foreignism" and social inequalities that violated human dignity.⁸² The denial of constitutional rights and the extension of federal overreach could be overshadowed by the need to protect the victims of plural marriage.⁸³

In the end, the majority ruled against the Mormons and decided that polygamists had no constitutional rights to engage in a marital system that was prohibited by Congress. Chief Justice Morrison R. Waite, writing for the majority, indicated that the justices agreed with the government's claim that polygamy was an "odious [practice] among the northern and western nations of Europe, and, until the establishment of the Mormon Church, was almost exclusively a feature of life of Asiatic and of African people...and from the earliest history of England, polygamy has been treated as an offence against society."⁸⁴ Additionally, Waite adopted the *belief* versus *practice* argument and his response remains a frequently cited precedent. To allow a citizen to "excuse his practices...because of his religious beliefs" would be "to permit every citizen to become a law unto himself."⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Gordon, 258.

⁸¹ Ibid., 270.

⁸² Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 134.

⁸³ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 277.

⁸⁴ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 135.

⁸⁵ Talbot, 148.

Federal Pressure Intensifies

The *Reynolds* decision unleashed a wave of anti-polygamy activity and galvanized reformers to petition Congress for stronger legal action. Senator George Edmunds, a Republican from Vermont, leaped at the opportunity to reform the marriage law in Utah. Aware of the previous and ineffective attempts to ban plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints, Edmunds was one of several congressmen who harbored the belief that to be a member of the restored Church of Jesus Christ meant that one could not also embody good citizenship.⁸⁶ The final two anti-polygamy laws, carrying Senator Edmunds's name, would undertake the further prosecution and punishment of polygamists and essentially exclude any Saints from local or national political influence.

The first, the Edmunds Act of 1882, allowed easier prosecution of polygamists by designating polygamy a crime and making “unlawful cohabitation” a misdemeanor, punishable by a six-month prison term and a fine of three hundred dollars. To ensure more convictions, the law made not only anyone practicing polygamy exempt from jury duty, but anyone who believed in the Principle was challenged as a juror; thus effectively prohibiting all Latter-day Saints from jury service.⁸⁷ The law also disenfranchised and barred from public office, “any person cohabiting with more than one woman” and any woman cohabiting with a man already married. In effect, from that moment onward, to practice polygamy meant to give up some of the most fundamental rights of American citizenship.⁸⁸ “Unlawful cohabitation” was fairly easy to prove and wives were frequently constrained to testify

⁸⁶ Talbot, 150.

⁸⁷ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 48.

⁸⁸ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 150.

against their husbands in court.⁸⁹ Children born after 1883 into a polygamous marriage were labeled as illegitimate, effectively obfuscating inheritance rights. The U.S. Government made clear its resolve to eradicate polygamy once and for all, even if it meant going after women and children.⁹⁰

The 1880s, a period Latter-day Saint historians wearily call “The Raid,” was a time of fierce prosecution. Legal records show that there were more than 1,400 indictments for “unlawful cohabitation” from 1882 until Utah statehood in 1896, with most occurring from 1886 to 1889.⁹¹ As a result, polygamists and their wives, including then Church president, John Taylor, and most of the leadership, went into hiding or “underground.” Some fled to Mexico or Canada with one or more of their wives, some left to serve foreign missions or to another territory close to Utah; all to avoid being detected by federal marshals.⁹² Therefore, most prosecutions were of less notorious polygamists, the small town farmer with two, maybe three wives and limited resources to post bail or pay the fine when convicted. It was a slow and expensive process and, in the end, did not give a surveillant public many high-profile cases.⁹³

The second and final anti-polygamy law to have passed through both Houses of Congress, though others were in the works and more U.S. Supreme Court cases were decided against the Church before the 1890 Manifesto was finally announced, was the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887. It sought to undermine the political and economic power of the Church

⁸⁹ Talbot, 152.

⁹⁰ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 175–76.

⁹¹ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 337.

⁹² Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 49.

⁹³ Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 342–43.

and tighten the provisions against polygamists. The U.S. attorney general was given authority to escheat all property holdings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company, a Church program that provided financial assistance to converts emigrating to Utah from Europe, was also dissolved and its property escheated in the same manner. All escheated property was directed to be used for public schools, undoubtedly to provide Latter-day Saint children with a secular education that would deter them from continuing the practice of an illegal marital system. As a final nail in the coffin, all women in the Utah Territory, plural wife, monogamous wife, single or unaffiliated with the Church, were disenfranchised.⁹⁴

The 1890 Manifesto

The message from Congress after the *Reynolds* case to the vast majority of Utah territorial residents was for the Saints to “behave themselves in the future; to...obey the laws of the land and bring order out of disorder.”⁹⁵ Thus, when 83 year-old Church President Wilford Woodruff called a quiet and intimate meeting with Church leaders on the morning of September 24, 1890 to discuss a plan to phase out polygamy, it was hardly seen as an unforeseen proposal. A few weeks later at a conference in Salt Lake City, President Woodruff read aloud a Manifesto to the general population of the Church and the vote to sustain the motion was unanimous.⁹⁶

Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages, which laws have been pronounced constitutional by the court of last resort, I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence

⁹⁴ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 49.

⁹⁵ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 150.

⁹⁶ Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 153.

with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them do likewise...my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land.⁹⁷

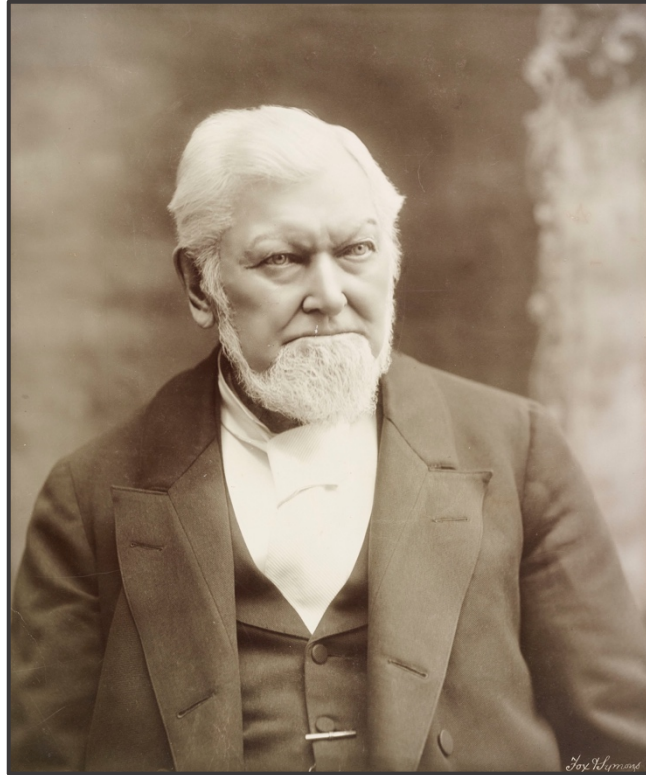


Figure 3. *Portrait of Wilford Woodruff*. Photograph by Fox and Symons, 1898. Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

Though the Manifesto raised more questions than it resolved, it was not the hyperbolic capitulation to federal pressure that scholars have presented. Jan Shipps argues that negotiations between the federal government and Church authorities had been taking place behind the scenes for some time.⁹⁸ President Woodruff was known to have agonized over the decision, but had already enacted Church policy that no longer officially sanctioned

⁹⁷ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Official Declaration - 1.

⁹⁸ Jan Shipps, "The Principle Revoked: A Closer Look at the Demise of Plural Marriage," *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 68, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23286127>.

or openly encouraged plural marriage. The Latter-day Saint community at large felt a sense of “great relief” at its announcement with one woman recalling later that her bishop had even warned her that such a momentous decision was soon to be publicized.⁹⁹

The change in policy was confusing to polygamous families. Church leaders offered little, universal guidance about what was to be done for those already in plural marriage. Most would not abandon their wives or their children. After 1890, husbands were responsible financially for their plural wives and their children but were denied conjugal rights.¹⁰⁰ Some rejected the Manifesto and kept living the Principle, usually uprooting their families and moving to Mexico or out of the territory in the process. Plural wives were left in a financially vulnerable position with confusion about what was permissible and what was not.¹⁰¹

In 1896, Utah became a State and President Benjamin Harrison granted amnesty to those polygamists who had complied with the law since the 1890 Manifesto. Eventually, all parties reached a tacit agreement that with the passage of time and the death of the “polygamous generation,” the practice would at last end.¹⁰² Nonetheless, a tiny, inflexible faction of traditionalist members refused to stop entering into plural marriage, prompting a second Manifesto by then Church President Joseph F. Smith in 1904 and in 1909 the Church began excommunicating members for practicing polygamy.¹⁰³

Plural marriage was an institution that spanned over six decades. The Saints were coaxed into it and they were coaxed out of it. Introduced by Church founder Joseph Smith, in

⁹⁹ Shipps, "The Principle Revoked: A Closer Look at the Demise of Plural Marriage," 71.

¹⁰⁰ Shipps, "The Principle Revoked," 74–75.

¹⁰¹ Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 161.

¹⁰² Harline, 162.

¹⁰³ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 159.

Nauvoo, Illinois, polygamy was initially practiced in secret and among only the most faithful. An impetus to Smith's death, some hoped it would dwindle after they left Nauvoo but the freedom of the trails west only fostered open acknowledgment. The isolation of the Rocky Mountains and the Church-controlled legal system encouraged and protected the further practice of polygamy. From 1862 to 1890, federal pressure intensified as did opposition from a shocked American public. After the 1890 Manifesto, there existed a time of ambiguity while polygamists and their families navigated the end of a what they believed was a divine principle given to test their faith and strengthen their collective identity. The next chapter will examine the religious context of plural marriage, the initial reactions both inside and outside the community and a delineation of polygamous behaviors with the experience of the plural wives.

CHAPTER 2

A HIGHER PRINCIPLE

This is all easy and natural when you understand it right.

John Bennion

Professor Jan Shipps contends that it is impossible to separate early Church history from theology.¹⁰⁴ The doctrine was inextricably linked to polygamy's historical storyline as eternal and religious truths were unfolded "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little."¹⁰⁵ Joseph Smith described God as a dynamic, exalted being who interacted continuously with humankind especially in the restoration of the early Christian church, which the Latter-day Saints believed to be one of many distinguishing elements to their movement. To explain the logic behind the practice of plural marriage among the nineteenth century Latter-day Saints, one must first grasp their belief in continuing revelation, both to individuals and to Church leaders, in the doctrine of eternal marriage, in a restoration of all things, and in a millenarian outlook that emphasized building the kingdom of God on the earth in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰⁴ Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁵ *The Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 28:30.

Continuing Revelation and Eternal Marriage

The religious history of the organization and doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints follows a process which included Joseph Smith inquiring about a concept, receiving an answer through the form of a vision, a heavenly messenger or divine inspiration and then implementing the new teachings into practice. It was through these revelatory experiences that Smith established his authority in the Church and assumed the mantle to act as a conduit between heaven and earth. Christine Talbot concludes that “authority is central to Mormonism,” and that leaders are “called of God.” Any practice or policy given by an ordained leader, one who held the priesthood, was in actuality from God.¹⁰⁶ As the Church’s organization expanded during Smith’s tenure in Nauvoo, his authority would be challenged repeatedly, but his pattern of receiving revelation for the entire Church remained consistent.

In one example, Smith and his companion, Oliver Cowdery, prayed about the principle of baptism. A heavenly messenger appeared and explained to them that baptism is a saving ordinance necessary for salvation and conferred upon them the priesthood, or the authority to act in God’s name. Through this and other visitations, Smith received priesthood keys to perform all saving ordinances, including the authority to marry or “seal” husbands and wives together for all eternity.¹⁰⁷ According to Smith, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ all mankind would live for eternity, but to attain the status of “exaltation” meant to become like God, indeed to become a god. Through the receipt of saving ordinances, such as the marriage sealing and baptism, and through one’s own good works and righteous living,

¹⁰⁶ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 22–23.

¹⁰⁷ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 19.

the faithful would be rewarded with exaltation in the afterlife to dwell with their families with God as a god. These revolutionary concepts energized the early Saints and deepened their trust in Joseph Smith as their prophet and as God's mouthpiece on earth.¹⁰⁸

It was during the relatively stable years in Nauvoo, Illinois, that Joseph Smith received revelations linking family, salvation and exaltation. Sociologist Kimball Young described the new doctrines as a "grandiose scheme of salvation" by which the Saints could secure a pathway to eternal progression.¹⁰⁹ It was and is a family centered theology that focuses on family relationships meant to continue into the next life.

In 1852 during the official announcement of the Church's acceptance and practice of plural marriage, Orson Pratt elucidated further the notion of eternal, familial relationships. Pratt taught of Adam and Eve's admonition from God to "multiply and replenish the earth," and produce a righteous seed because "a man's and a woman's posterity in the eternal worlds after are to constitute his [and her] glory, kingdom and dominion."¹¹⁰ Those men bearing the priesthood were authorized to seal men and women for "time and all eternity," and not "until death do you part." By doing so, they and all their children, were bound or sealed together for this life and for the next. This salvation narrative threaded saving ordinances with family relationships and paved the way for the introduction of a system that allowed one man to be married to more than one woman.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1954.), 29.

¹¹⁰ Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," 61.

¹¹¹ Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830–1853*, 7–8.

Restorative Practices and Preparing for the Return of Jesus Christ

As explained early in Chapter One, Joseph Smith encountered the doctrine of plural marriage while studying Old Testament marriage practices. Adhering to his pattern of inquiry followed by the receiving of divine guidance, Smith was instructed upon the principle of the plurality of wives and its connection to the Nauvoo doctrines he had been introducing. In the theological framework of exaltation and eternal marriage, the belief of “the restoration of all things” also explains the logic behind plural marriage. Past and present Latter-day Saints believe in a period known as “The Great Apostasy,” the time when priesthood authority was taken off the earth, starting with the deaths of the early New Testament apostles, including Peter, and ending with the ordination of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by a heavenly messenger in 1829.¹¹² Starting with Smith’s first vision in 1820, the restoration of Jesus Christ’s gospel instigated what Jan Shipps designates “a latter-day capitulation of the ancient Patriarchal Age.”¹¹³ In other words, Joseph Smith would introduce doctrines and practices consistent with the Old Testament, Judaic world and restore what had been taken away.

The Saints identified themselves as members of the House of Israel who were to gather to a new Zion where they might build a temple and appoint patriarchs to pronounce blessings on individual Saints. Similar in consecration to the temple in Jerusalem, worship in Latter-day Saint temples would not include animal sacrifice but would be a place where the saving ordinance of sealing a man and a woman together could be performed. In this early emphasis on Old Testament practices, Smith carved a space for plural marriage.¹¹⁴ Though

¹¹² Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 20.

¹¹³ Shipps, *Mormonism*, 61.

¹¹⁴ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 20–21.

most Old Testament teachings and practices were not adopted into the developing theological landscape, the accentuation on “restoration” from ancient to modern times allowed Smith to fuse the Old Testament principle of a plurality of wives to other concepts appropriated from the ancient patriarchs.

Like other millenarian movements of the early nineteenth century, the restored Church of Jesus Christ embraced the rejection of past hierarchies in favor of an emphasis on freedom of thought in religious terms as well as political ones. Gordon Wood described the Christianity of the early American Republic as “more popular, more evangelical, more ecstatic, more personal, more secular, and more optimistic.” It was an era that “combined the past and the present, communalism and individualism, folkways and enlightenment in odd and confusing ways.”¹¹⁵ At the heart of the millenarian mindset was the abandonment of the Calvinist view that placed all control of individual salvation in the hands of an enigmatic God. Joseph Smith taught the opposite of pre-destination, namely that one’s standing before God is not pre-destined nor unchangeable and that each must, in the words of Paul to the Philippians, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”¹¹⁶

In tandem with the anti-Calvinist approach, many early American Christians believed that faith and action could usher in the long-held anticipation of a millennium world and the return of Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith and his followers were no different and actually spoke often of the spiritual preparation necessary for each individual in the last days or the “latter

¹¹⁵ Gordon Wood, “The Rise of an American Original: Mormonism,” in *Religion in American History: A Reader*, ed. Jon Butler and Harry Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 181.

¹¹⁶ Philippians 2: 12-13.

days” before the second coming of Christ.¹¹⁷ Orson Pratt and subsequent Church leaders, when strongly endorsing plural marriage, alluded to this final preparation and also wove it into the polygamy thread of Church doctrine. Pratt taught that because God had preserved his most righteous and faithful beings to inhabit the earth in these final days before the millennium, these spirits had to be sent to homes whose inhabitants “hearken to hear his voice and receive the proclamation of the gospel.” These are families who are “better calculated to bring up children in the right way.”¹¹⁸ In order to provide physical bodies for these preserved spirits, the traditional, marital boundaries were reshaped into a system that could ensure the propagation of “righteous seed” by faithful men and women as the Church anticipated the return of Jesus Christ.

A deeper look at Church demographics and polygamous behaviors will come later in this chapter. For now, as to the understanding of this particular doctrine and logic behind the practice, the husbands in polygamous marriages were, more often than not, Church leaders or men who were thought of as deeply committed to the Church and therefore would qualify as those who would, in the words of Pratt, “follow the Almighty.”¹¹⁹ Only faithful men were allowed by Church authorities to enter into the practice and to provide homes for children who had been preserved to prepare the earth for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

¹¹⁷ Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830–1853*, 4–5.

¹¹⁸ Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” 62–63.

¹¹⁹ Pratt, 63.

The Man Behind the Principle

Scholars disagree as to Joseph Smith's authentic intentions in the introduction of the "Principle." Some find his and others' theological explanations a smoke screen for a lifestyle that allowed only the elite to fulfill their licentious appetites. Fawn Brodie, in *No Man Knows My History*, argued that "Joseph was no careless libertine who could be content with clandestine mistresses. There was too much of the Puritan in him and he could not rest until he had redefined the nature of sin and erected a stupendous, theological edifice to support his new theories on marriage."¹²⁰ Others conclude that Mormon polygamy was not envisioned as an outlet for sexual gratification, nor was it a means to offset some demographic divide between men and women. It was simply, "a rational choice based on their definition of reality."¹²¹ In theory, male lust was to be transformed into a righteous, God-given drive to populate worlds and women were given the opportunity to marry and become mothers.¹²²

This rational choice, according to Joseph Smith, was forced upon him by a sword-wielding heavenly messenger. Elder Lorenzo Snow, future Church president, recorded a conversation he had with Joseph Smith in 1843. During this exchange, Smith told Snow that an angel had appeared to him and chastised him for not having obeyed God in introducing the plurality of wives among the Saints. Smith was threatened by a messenger with a drawn sword "with destruction unless he went forward and obeyed the command."¹²³ His apparent reluctance to make such a drastic, social change reflected the nineteenth century attitudes

¹²⁰ Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?*, 91.

¹²¹ Wyatt, "Mormon Polygyny in the Nineteenth Century," 16.

¹²² Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870*, 311.

¹²³ Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *The Historical Record* 5-8 (1890 1886): 222, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/historicalrecord01jens/page/n1/mode/1up>.

toward marriage and monogamy in the Christian realm. Though no stranger to radical ideas about God and man (and woman), Smith's delay in introducing the Principle, even to his most loyal of followers, was not irregular in light of his New England heritage. He never did record his personal feelings on plural marriage and, as stated by Paula Harline, "whether he was motivated by religious obedience or pursued sexual dalliance clothed in divine sanction cannot be fully resolved through historical analysis."¹²⁴

The Initial Response

Klaus Hansen studied early Latter-day Saint views on sexuality and marriage and argued that their attitudes were rooted in Calvinism and Anglicanism. Sexual transgressions, mostly adultery and fornication, were viewed as heinous sins, yet Puritans regarded sex within marriage as a natural expression between a man and woman as well as a means for procreation.¹²⁵ Joseph Smith and the early Saints also held a positive perspective about sex in marriage but cautioned restraint in regards to sexual activity outside of marriage. At first, for Smith and others, polygamy was adultery and affronted not only their Puritan sensibilities but their democratic ideals born out of the revolution. Nancy Cott, in her seminal work, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, acknowledges the deeply lodged Christian model of monogamy in American political thought. Monogamy stood for government consent, moderation and political liberty while polygamy was associated with tyranny and corruption.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 7.

¹²⁵ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 147–48.

¹²⁶ Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 22–23.

As the Church was a “society in which moral standards were internalized,” it is little wonder that the initial response to Smith’s commandment from God was that of skepticism and outrage.¹²⁷ Historian Lawrence Foster has argued that “in almost all recorded cases, initial presentation of the belief in plural marriage to either men or women produced shock, horror, disbelief or general emotional confusion.” Those within the community expressed intense “inner turmoil.”¹²⁸ Brigham Young later spoke of his inner feelings when first confronted with the doctrine of plural marriage. “It was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave, and I could hardly get over it for a long time. And when I saw a funeral, I felt to envy the corpse its situation, and to regret that I was not in the coffin.”¹²⁹ Young’s successor, John Taylor, expressed similar thoughts, recalling that “when Joseph Smith first made known the revelation concerning plural marriage and of having more wives than one, it made my flesh crawl.”¹³⁰

Smith was cautious when approaching other men, all of whom were in his inner circle. They were loyal to him and truly believed him to be a prophet of God. Benjamin Johnson, private secretary to the prophet, was stunned to learn of the new teaching and even more aghast when asked to petition his sister if she might consent to be married to Smith. “I had always believed him to be a good man and wished to believe it still and would try to; and that I would take for him a message to my sister, and if the doctrine was true, all would be

¹²⁷ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 149.

¹²⁸ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 153.

¹²⁹ Brigham Young, “Plurality of Wives - The Free Agency of Man,” *Journal of Discourses* 3 (July 14, 1855): 266.

¹³⁰ John Taylor, “The Gospel’s Restoration,” *Journal of Discourses* 23 (April 9, 1882): 66.

well, but if I should afterwards learn that it was offered to insult or prostitute my sister, I would take his life.”¹³¹



Figure 4. *Purgatory: Joseph, Emma, and the Revelation on Plural Marriage*. Painted by Anthony Sweat, 2019. Used with permission from the artist. The painting depicts Joseph Smith reading the revelation on plural marriage to his wife Emma.

If the men were disgusted at Smith’s intentions to upend established practices and patterns of marriage, then the women were just as, if not more so, appalled at the new principle. Helen Mar Whitney, daughter of apostle Heber C. Kimball wrote, “My father was

¹³¹ Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 221.

the first to introduce it to me; which had a similar effect to a sudden shock of a small earthquake.”¹³² Hannah Tapfield King, 55th and final wife to be sealed to Brigham Young, expressed her reaction in a letter to her brother. “It had an extraordinary effect on me, for though I had known for a year that such a principle existed in the church, when I heard it read, and some things in it which I did not know, I confess to you I became skeptical and my heart questioned with tears of agony, ‘did this come from God?’”¹³³ Lucy Walker Kimball, plural wife to Joseph Smith and then to Heber C. Kimball recorded her initial response after a conversation with Smith that resembled similar, private meetings between Smith and prospective female and male participants.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith first mentioned the principle of plural marriage to me I became very indignant, and told him emphatically that I did not wish him ever to mention it to me again, as my feelings and education revolted against any thing of such a nature. He counseled me, however, to pray to the Lord for light and understanding in relation thereto, and promised me if I would do sincerely, I should receive a testimony of the correctness of the principle.¹³⁴

Not all women who were apprised of the practice of plural marriage in Nauvoo would come to accept it. Rachel Ridgway Ivins Grant, mother of future Church President Heber J. Grant, remarked when asked to enter into the order of plural marriage that she would “sooner go to hell as a virtuous woman than to heaven as a whore.”¹³⁵ Lucy Walker Kimball and Rachel Grant’s experiences mirror the broad Nauvoo reaction of the early Saints. Kimball’s narrative explains why they did not immediately reject this system of marriage: they believed

¹³² Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes in Nauvoo after the Martyrdom of the Prophet and Patriarch,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11 (March 1, 1883): 148.

¹³³ Rebecca Bartholomew, *Audacious Women: Early British Mormon Immigrants* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1995), 126.

¹³⁴ Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 229.

¹³⁵ Rachel Ridgway Ivins Grant, quoted in Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-46.”

in continuing revelation from a God interested in the affairs of mankind and they believed Joseph Smith spoke with divine authority. It was a way for them to show their loyalty to their prophet and a way to further commit themselves to the movement.¹³⁶ The Saints were eased into its acceptance because it was part of a religious composition. Like other nascent dogma introduced by Smith, plural marriage was not entirely embraced by everyone and certainly not by everyone asked to enter into it.

The Country's Reaction

At the outset, and especially after Orson Pratt's announcement in 1852, the American public responded with even more venom and disbelief than members of the Latter-day Saint community when first confronted with the Principle. Author George Davis railed against the Joseph Smith, claiming that he had "outraged every feeling of decency and humanity, in the gratification of his beastly propensities" while political writer Ballard S. Dunn contended that Smith "desired many wives; because, to a sensual, fanatical, emotional nature like his, sexuality was the chief good."¹³⁷ Professor Christine Talbot argues that with the implementation of plural marriage, the Saints magnified a great ideological divide between themselves and the rest of the nation. "No other racial or religious community in the nation provoked such a prolific, vitriolic national response."¹³⁸

Dozens of nineteenth century authors sensationalized the sexual prowess of Joseph Smith and other Church leaders, claiming that he had seduced at least "400 women," in a

¹³⁶ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 27.

¹³⁷ George Davis, *An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph Smith* (St. Louis, MO: Chambers and Knapp, 1844), 147; Ballard S. Dunn, "How to Solve the Mormon Problem," (New York), 1877, 7.

¹³⁸ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 34.

“system of universal female prostitution” full of “harems” and “debaucheries.”¹³⁹ In conjunction with a titillated public, reformers, abolitionists and suffragists assumed a more concerned role to address the “Mormon Question.” As discussed in Chapter One, polygamy was eventually associated with slavery in the American mind. Leading public figures, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, expressed anxiety over the Principle’s existence in the Rocky Mountains. Stowe wrote that plural marriage was “a slavery which debases and degrades womanhood, motherhood, and family...polygamy destroyed the family and women’s unique place in it and made women unfit for their moral and social responsibilities.”¹⁴⁰ After the initial shock of the practice, it would require a great migration west for the Saints to come to accept it while the rest of the country would never fully reconcile their democratic ideals to the Church’s alien disruption of established marital order.

Plural Marriage Behaviors

Once settled in the Intermountain West and a few years removed from external opposition and harassment, the Saints attempted to institute polygamy with little to no experience to draw upon. Its shape took on different forms in different Latter-day Saint communities. Scholars have acknowledged the irregularities and inconsistencies from settlement to settlement, concluding that there was not a one-size-fits-all polygamous marriage and it did not exist long enough to normalize patterns of behavior.¹⁴¹ What scholars

¹³⁹ Brian C. Hales, “Joseph Smith’s Personal Polygamy,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2 (2012): 164, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23292762>.

¹⁴⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, quoted in Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 149.

¹⁴¹ Jessie L. Embry, “Polygamous and Monogamous Mormon Women: A Comparison,” in *Women In Utah History: Paradigm or Paradox?* (2005): 22.

have done, however, is to study the quality of the marriages, the divorce and fertility rates, the nature of the marriage system, the types of women and men who entered into it, and specific communities and regions over time. The consensus holds that, collectively, between 8 and 10 percent of marriageable men actually practiced polygamy as did between 15 to 20 percent of marriageable women.¹⁴² Stanley Ivins examined marital behaviors within polygamy and maintains that despite the popular misconceptions of nineteenth century Latter-day Saint polygamists as long-bearded, old men with teenage brides, the average age for polygamists to stop marrying was at age 40. Two-thirds of polygamists married only one extra wife, 21 percent married a third wife and the remaining 12 percent married 4 or more wives. As for the age of plural wives when married, 38 percent were in their teens, 32 percent were in their twenties and 30 percent were over the age of 30.¹⁴³

Others have studied the divorce and fertility rates among the polygamous families with Phillip Kunz concluding that wives in polygamous unions actually experienced lower fertility rates than their monogamous counterparts, and polygamist marriages showed a 28 percent divorce rate compared to a 3 percent rate among the monogamists.¹⁴⁴ Contrary to contemporary opinion, Utah women enjoyed greater freedom in terms of marriage and divorce than women in other polygamous cultures, and also, as Lawrence Foster specifies, more than their monogamous counterparts.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Kunz, "One Wife or Several? A Comparative Study of Late Nineteenth-Century Marriage in Utah," 60; Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy."

¹⁴³ Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," 313–15.

¹⁴⁴ Kunz, "One Wife or Several? A Comparative Study of Late Nineteenth-Century Marriage in Utah," 69.

¹⁴⁵ Lawrence Foster, "A Little Known Defense of Polygamy," *Dialogue, a Journal of Mormon Thought*, no. 9 (Winter 1974): 29, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/DialogueV09N0423.pdf>.

The ease in which women, especially plural wives were granted a divorce in the territory of Utah would seem incongruous with the Church theological focus on eternal marriage and the preeminence of plural marriage. According to Carol Cornwall Madsen, “the religious faithfulness and mutual affection of the participants were the primary determinants of a successful union” and therefore eternity was second in significance after a marriage conducive of peace and unity.¹⁴⁶ In an 1847 divorce case brought before a Church high council, the decision offered this precedent: “No man or woman should ever be compelled to live together who cannot live in union. You two now are to separate and not come together again.”¹⁴⁷ In 1861 at a Church conference, Brigham Young extended this guidance, “When a woman becomes alienated in her feelings and affections from her husband, it is then his duty to give her a bill [of divorcement] and set her free.” Furthermore, if a man proved “unworthy” as a husband or a father, he forfeited his marriage rights and covenants and his wife or wives were “free from him.”¹⁴⁸

On paper and from the pulpit, Utah territorial divorce law and marital customs relating to polygamy strived to be lenient and mindful of the plural wives, but fair intentions often fell short of reality. In the 1930s, Kimball Young surveyed 110 plural marriages in an attempt to rate the degree of success or degree of failure. He made his determinations based on the following criteria: 1. economic conditions or whether or not the wives and children were reasonably comfortable as compared to the rest of their community and, 2. the existence

¹⁴⁶ Madsen, “At Their Peril: Utah Law and the Case of Plural Wives, 1850 -1900,” 41.

¹⁴⁷ Stephen J. Sorenson, “Civil and Criminal Jurisdiction of LDS Bishops’ and High Council Courts, 1847-1852,” in *Task Papers in LDS History*, vol. 17, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Salt Lake City, 1977), 32.

¹⁴⁸ Brigham Young, “Few Words of Doctrine given by President Brigham Young in the Tabernacle in Great Salt Lake City” (Salt Lake City, 1861), quoted in Madsen, “At Their Peril,” 53.

or frequency of inner conflicts, especially between the plural wives and between the wives and the husband. He rated 53 percent of plural marriages as either “highly successful” or “reasonably successful,” 25 percent fell into the middle or “moderately successful” range and the remaining marriages were rated as “considerable conflict” or “severe conflict.”¹⁴⁹ As previously cited, the divorce rate among plural marriages of 28 percent roughly coincides with Young’s findings of “considerable” or “severe” conflicted marriages amounting to around 1 in 4 polygamous unions.

The Latter-day Saint Marriage System

Another key component to understanding the practice of the Principle is the different types of marriages performed among the Saints. As explained earlier, Joseph Smith introduced the doctrine of eternal marriage. Priesthood bearers were given the authorization to marry or “seal” a man and a woman together for time and all eternity. These sealing ceremonies are required to take place in Latter-day Saint temples. Smith taught that in order to attain the highest degree of glory in heaven, a man and a woman must be sealed together.¹⁵⁰ The phrase “time and all eternity” is especially worthy of note because not all marriages carried the same meaning and responsibilities. Some individuals could be married for time, and others, only for eternity. Kathryn Daynes best explains the intricacies of the Saints’ celestial, marital schools of thought. “Some sealings were for eternity only and conferred no earthly rights or obligations. Similar to eternity-only marriages were nominal

¹⁴⁹ Young, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?*, 56–57.

¹⁵⁰ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 71; *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 132.

marriages. Neither appears to have bestowed rights of sexual access on the couple, but wives in nominal marriages used their husbands' surnames and may have received some temporal help.”¹⁵¹

In other cases, marriages were performed that had no effect in eternity if a wife had been previously sealed to another husband. These “for time” marriages conferred upon the couple all earthly rights and duties of marriage just as any other civil marriage. In order to visualize the various types of marriages in the Mormon system, the following table illustrates the different sealings of my polygamist ancestor Samuel Bennion and his 5 wives.

¹⁵¹ Daynes, 76–77.

Table 1. Samuel Bennion Marriages¹⁵²

Wife	Marriage to Samuel	Brief summary
Mary Bushell	1839	Mary was his first wife. She and Samuel converted to the Church, then immigrated from England to Nauvoo, and eventually settled in Taylorsville, Utah. Mary and Samuel were sealed for time and all eternity in 1852. She and Samuel had 12 children.
Sarah Williams	1853	Sarah was married to Samuel when she was 19 years old and he was 35. She died in childbirth a year after their marriage, in 1854. There is no record of a temple sealing between Samuel and Sarah, and their marriage appears to have only been “for time” with conjugal rights. Sarah did not live with Samuel and Mary and is buried under the name Sarah Williams Bennion.
Rhoda Jones	1868	Rhoda married a John Sargeant in 1858. Ten years later, Rhoda left John and immigrated to Utah from England where she met Samuel and was sealed to him “for time and all eternity.” She had 6 children with Samuel and lived next door to Samuel and Mary.
Elizabeth Jones	1882	Elizabeth was sealed to Samuel in 1882 after her death. In Latter-day Saint temples, saving ordinances, such as sealings, for those who have passed away can be performed by proxy. In this case, someone would have stood in for Elizabeth during the ceremony and her marriage to Samuel was sealed for “all eternity.”
Ann Chamberlain	2019	Ann was born in 1829 and died in 1867. As with Elizabeth, Ann was sealed to Samuel for “all eternity” by proxy after her death. Proxy sealings know no expiration date and Bennion descendants must have uncovered enough information about Samuel and Ann to perform the ceremony vicariously 130 years after Samuel’s death.

¹⁵² “Samuel Bennion (1818–1889) | Person | Family Tree | FamilySearch,” accessed July 24, 2020, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KWJ8-SR4>.

In accordance with Stanley Ivins and Kimball Young's estimations, Samuel Bennion fell into the 12 percent of polygamists who married more than 4 wives and into the 53 percent of plural marriages that were rated as "highly" or "reasonably" successful. His marital resume offers a compelling microhistory of polygamy among the Latter-day Saints. The manifold types of marriages he and other polygamists experienced were optimally governed by tacit guidelines but were not always carefully followed. Eugene Campbell and Bruce Campbell maintain that the Saints had rules regarding plural marriage and even though the Principle was inspired by the Old Testament patriarchs, "there is little indication that [the Old Testament] was used as a serious guide to their marriage regulation."¹⁵³ Among these rules was that the first wife had to give her consent before the husband could take on another wife. In many cases, the first wife "vetted" any potential wives, though courtships were usually short in a frontier environment.¹⁵⁴ Samuel Bennion's brother, John, further expounded upon this directive, when, in a letter to his in-laws no less, John explained of his wife, Esther's, reservations in sanctioning his entering into plural marriage.

...also Esther has her hands full but many of the good women here like Sarah the wife of Abraham and Leah and Racheal of old they get other women and give them to their husbands to wife which helps to lighten their burden when they get good industrious women as well as raising up numerous posterity _but Esther is rather behind in this thing She cant find one exactly to please her and she would rather wait and be rightly suited then get me one that would be less good she says If she were in old England amongst the old neighbors and kindred she could soon be suited this is all natural and easy when you understand it right.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Bruce L. Campbell and Eugene E. Campbell, "Divorce among the Mormon Polygamists: Extent and Explanations," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Winter 1978): 17, 19–20, accessed November 23, 2020, https://issuu.com/utah10/docs/uhq_volume46_1978_number1/s/129529.

¹⁵⁴ Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?*, 131.

¹⁵⁵ John Bennion, July 23, 1854, 116, Bennion Family History, John Bennion Family Vol. IV.

Two years later, and at the urging of Brigham Young, Esther did eventually give her consent for John to marry again but the two wives did not meet before John brought his second wife, Esther Ann, home. They had only known each other for two weeks.¹⁵⁶ There were cases when the husband married again without any consultation with the first wife but in a study by Vicky Burgess-Olsen, 91.7 percent of first wives are stated to have given consent to any subsequent marriages.¹⁵⁷

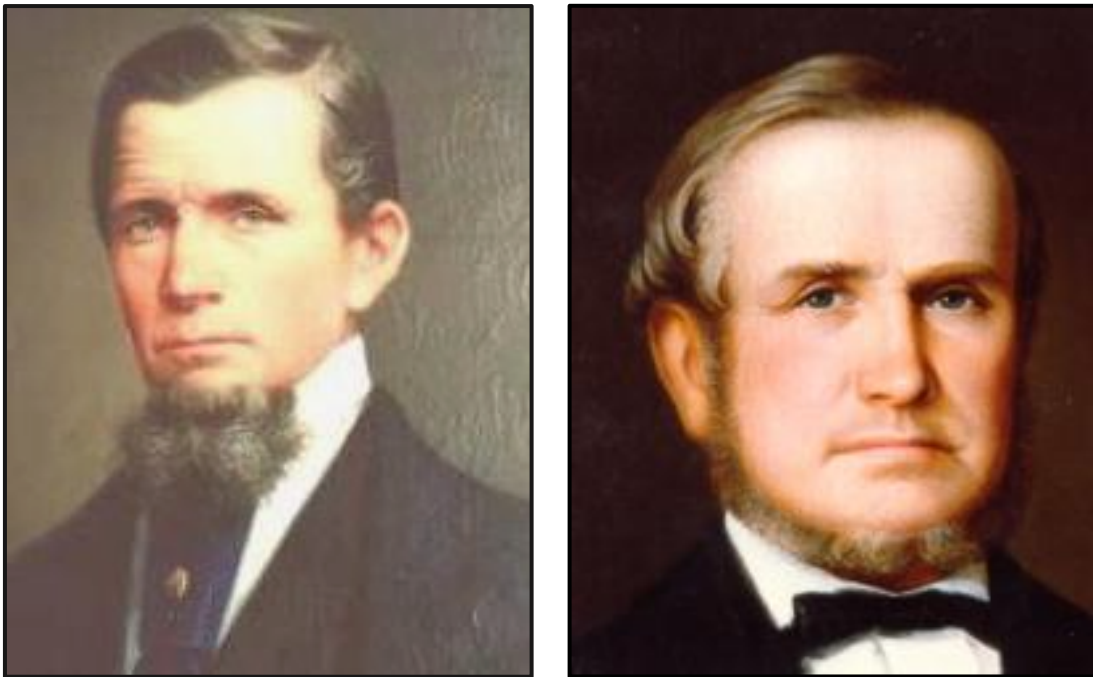


Figure 5. John Bennion (left) and his brother Samuel, my ancestor. Oil canvas paintings by Daniel Weggeland. Date and location unknown. Used with permission from the Bennion Family Association.

¹⁵⁶ Ruth W. Rogers, *Bennion Family History: John Bennion Family*, vol. IV (Salt Lake City: Bennion Family Association, 1990), 27.

¹⁵⁷ Vicky Burgess-Olsen, "Family Structure and Dynamics in Utah Mormon Families" (Northwestern University, 1975), 108, accessed July 24, 2020, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/docview/302766394?pq-origsite=primo>.

Courtship and Marital Expectations

If the system of taking more wives opposed nineteenth century norms, then the process of frontier courtship between a husband and prospective brides also certainly departed from what was considered to be proper and improper courtship conduct. First, it was not uncommon for a woman to approach a man, married or single, with a proposal of marriage. This freedom of choice would be an argument used by pro-polygamy activists in the 1870s and 1880s to showcase the benefit of plural marriage as a “privilege” to plural wives because it afforded more options in an eternal companion.¹⁵⁸ Joseph Smith, when extending his strongest endorsement, spoke to the woman’s freedom to choose. “Woman would have her choice, this was a privilege that could not be denied her.”¹⁵⁹ Second, it was also not uncommon for a man to look within his own community or within his own household for a second, third or fourth wife. Single women were among the immigrants who gathered with the rest of the Saints to Zion and many became employed as domestic help in economically advantaged households.¹⁶⁰ Kathryn Daynes claims that these single immigrants along with divorced, widowed, and fatherless women were vulnerable and more easily persuaded to enter into marriage with a married man for nothing other than financial support.¹⁶¹

From the outset, it was not intended to be, in the words of Lucy Walker, “a love matter...But simply the giving up of myself as a sacrifice to establish that grand and glorious

¹⁵⁸ Ivins, “Notes on Mormon Polygamy,” 319.

¹⁵⁹ Lucy Walker Kimball Smith, “A Brief Biographical Sketch of the Life and Labors of Lucy Walker Kimball Smith,” in *Reminiscences of Latter-Day Saints: Giving an Account of Much Individual Suffering Endured for Religious Conscience*, ed. Lyman Omer Littlefield (Logan: Utah Journal Co., 1888), 46.

¹⁶⁰ Young, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?*, 125.

¹⁶¹ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 119.

principle that God had revealed to the world.”¹⁶² Daynes argues that “no evidence points to [plural] marriages entered into solely because of romantic love, companionship, or sexual attraction, although these may have developed as a result of the marriage.”¹⁶³ An exalting, eternal covenant over a love contract it may have been, yet, Kimball Young asserted that some abused the system for dishonorable intentions out of lust or power. There existed “unscrupulous men who used polygamy” as a convenient excuse to “get a new wife, and sometimes abandon their plural families when they got tired of them.”¹⁶⁴ These experiences tainted the community’s attitudes of polygamy and it became increasingly difficult for Church authorities to champion the practice to their congregations. How their perception of plural marriage and romantic love affected the practice in the long haul will be explored further in Chapter Three.

A Threat to American Institutions

For the American public at large, the Latter-day Saints’s deviation from standard marital mores could not be tolerated. Stanley Ivins proposes three main reasons for the widespread opposition against plural marriage: first, it was not compatible with the American way of life, second, it was thought to debase the women who lived it, and third, it caused disharmony and unhappiness in the family.¹⁶⁵ The Church’s political and social order was, in the public eye, the “direct opposite to the genius of true republicanism,” and “must

¹⁶² Lucy Walker, quoted in Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 465.

¹⁶³ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ Young, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?*, 137.

¹⁶⁵ Ivins, “Notes on Mormon Polygamy,” 319.

necessarily interfere with the rights of the citizen, and come into collision with the laws of the land.”¹⁶⁶ Anti-polygamists believed that polygamy rendered its subjects incapable of free conscience and degraded the autonomy of the citizen who, in the absence of personal liberties, disappeared behind the “polygamic theocracy” of the Church.¹⁶⁷

Nancy Cott, in *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, best explains how the practice of polygamy appeared to affront the democratic ideals of a nation rooted in Christian monogamy and republican individualism. Nineteenth century Americans defined marriage as a “bond that resembles the social contract that produces government.”¹⁶⁸ Cott elaborates by clarifying that in a marriage contract terms are set by both parties, with predictable rewards and duties and a union between the two is formed. Ideal marital relationships were centered on “reciprocal rights and responsibilities rather than formal hierarchy.”¹⁶⁹ A strong nation was built on the backs of strong marriages and a strong marriage consisted of consenting men and women who were apprised of their individual obligations and rights. Polygamy challenged the voluntary union of the marital bond, which in turn undercut the formal ties of citizens to their government. Monogamy shaped American legal and political traditions while polygamy did not “offer a single advantage.”¹⁷⁰

In conjunction with the threat to democratic institutions, plural marriage was presumed to destabilize nineteenth century assumptions about sex, particularly in marriage.

¹⁶⁶ J. M. Coyner, *Letters on Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Co., 1879), 8; Benjamin G. Ferris, *Utah and the Mormons: The History, Government, Doctrines, Customs, and Prospects of the Latter-Day Saints. From Personal Observation During a Six Months' Residence at Great Salt Lake City* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1854), 146.

¹⁶⁷ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 107.

¹⁶⁸ Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, 16.

¹⁶⁹ Cott, 16.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

Klaus Hansen argued that contemporary reformers challenged sexual practices within marriage and for many, “sin became synonymous with sex.” Moderation and restraint were the antidote to an individual’s concupiscence and when choosing a partner, one employed reason, virtue and moderation over fortune, beauty or momentary passion.¹⁷¹ Hansen further maintained that when it came to sex, the Saints left little record, but, like the Puritans, had a positive attitude toward sex in marriage and did “not share the hysterical attitude of the reformers.” Nonetheless, in the public mind, and especially for reformers, the unbridled license of polygamy was an excuse for excessive sexual activity that directly challenged their movement of sexual reform.

Almost immediately following the public acknowledgement of Church-sanctioned plural marriages in 1852, anti-polygamists responded with literature that depicted a system of oppression and degradation of women. For a nation already mired in a debate over slavery, it was not difficult to draw a parallel between polygamy and slavery and polygamy and crime. Latter-day Saint men were likened to southern slaveowners who bought and sold women and children.¹⁷² One novelist described women in Utah as “white slaves, required to do all the most servile drudgery” who are “painfully impressed with their utter inferiority, in divers ways and at all seasons; and are frequently...subjected to personal violence and...corporeal punishment.”¹⁷³ The image of a helpless white woman under the control of an insatiable older, white man, would be invoked again and again in popular fable. Antagonists assumed

¹⁷¹ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 150; Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, 17.

¹⁷² Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, 52–58.

¹⁷³ Alfreda Eva Bell, *Boadicea; the Mormon Wife: Life Scenes in Utah*, ed. Michael Austin and Ardis E. Parshall, Annotated ed. edition (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, Inc., 2016), 49.

wives became the property of men under polygamy, ever “available for men’s sexual consumption,” and they linked polygamy with property ownership.¹⁷⁴

Polygamy’s Defense

The enfranchisement of Utah women in February of 1870 only complicated the issue and did not prod plural wives to rise up against their husbands as many anti-polygamists had hoped. Furthermore, the paradox of nineteenth century Latter-day Saint women continues to be the subject of much scholarship as historians grapple to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory experiences of enfranchisement and plural wifery.¹⁷⁵ Utah women’s enfranchisement placed national suffragist activists in an awkward position but plural wives defended both suffrage and polygamy, contending that one reinforced the other. Emmeline B. Wells, a plural wife and prominent Church leader, wrote “Plural marriage makes woman more the companion and much less the subordinate than any other forms of marriage.”¹⁷⁶

That plural wives would become plural marriage’s most stalwart defenders surprised no one more than the system’s critics and opponents. Christine Talbot argues that the plural wives found a freedom under polygamy that allowed them to fulfill their domestic responsibilities and enlarge “their capacity for public life...for many women, their association with networks of sister-wives freed time for pursuing social and political activities.”¹⁷⁷ Eliza R. Snow, plural wife to Brigham Young, expounded, “The care of the

¹⁷⁴ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 118.

¹⁷⁵ Talbot, 64.

¹⁷⁶ Emmeline B. Wells, quoted in Talbot, 75.

¹⁷⁷ Talbot, 76.

children is a mother's first duty....it is not all her duty."¹⁷⁸ Another activist claimed, "In no other marriage covenant is there such perfect freedom for woman to pursue any pursuit or avocation she may choose."¹⁷⁹ To the plural wives, in this regard, polygamy empowered women to serve outside the home in a public capacity that otherwise would not have been opened to them.

When legislation was proposed to disenfranchise Utah women over the assumption that polygamist men were controlling their wives' votes, women within the community responded with mass meetings of indignation and letter writing campaigns to national newspapers and leaders of Congress.¹⁸⁰ "What nonsense!" Eliza Snow exclaimed from the pulpit of the Old Tabernacle to a crowd of aggrieved women.¹⁸¹ Hannah King added, "Are we really in America, the world-renowned land of liberty, of freedom, of equal rights? The land of which I dreamed in my youth...where freedom of thought and religious liberty were enjoyed by all?"¹⁸² The defense of enfranchisement by plural wives in the territory of Utah was indeed remarkable. Laurel Ulrich writes that Latter-day Saint women were standing up for more than their place at the ballots, they were defending their homes and their religious identity. "Their indignation emerged from religious passion, from a yearning for millennial justice, from the experience of being hounded and driven from place to place, and from the frustration of vainly petitioning judges, governors, and presidents for redress."¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ "R.S., Y.L., M.I.A. and Primary Reports," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 July 1882., 24.

¹⁷⁹ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 76.

¹⁸⁰ Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870*, 8.

¹⁸¹ Eliza Snow, quoted in Ulrich, 9.

¹⁸² "Great Indignation Meeting," *Deseret News*, January 19, 1870, 5.

¹⁸³ Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870*, 12.

The Experience of the Plural Wives

In contrast to the empowered and capable activists Ulrich describes, Paula Harline contends that the women of Mormon polygamy were never fully “comfortable with plural marriage, because, despite their best efforts to convince themselves otherwise, there still seemed something adulterous about it.”¹⁸⁴ They defended the institution because they believed above all else that they were defending their religion. They tolerated it for an eternal reward and because, reaching back to their faith’s very beginnings, it originated with Joseph Smith.¹⁸⁵

Nonetheless, despite their best efforts to publicly defend the Principle, it is human nature to remember pleasant experiences and to forget the unpleasant. Historian Richard Van Wagoner made this observation when studying the first-hand accounts of polygamists and their plural wives. “Contemporary diaries and letter accounts of polygamous relationships generally present a less-than glowing picture of polygamy,” while “positive testimonials are most often seen in public or retrospective accounts.”¹⁸⁶ The polygamous wives in Harline’s study wrote in the moment and left an undiluted history that, at times, belies the image of the staunch advocates that were visible to the public eye.

The great majority believed in the idea, but what they said and did without the walls of their own homes often betrayed the inner feelings of their heart. Plural wives across the social and economic spectrum extended their strongest endorsement in public while disparaging the practice in private. Phoebe Woodruff, first wife of President Wilford

¹⁸⁴ Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 1.

¹⁸⁵ Harline, 79.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Van Wagoner, quoted in Harline, 79.

Woodruff, author of the 1890 Manifesto, told a close friend, “I loathe the unclean thing with all the strength of my nature.”¹⁸⁷ Zina Young, wife of Brigham Young, comforted a young, struggling polygamous wife, reassuring her that her feelings were not her fault and that the “system” was to blame.¹⁸⁸ The daughter of Brigham Young’s right-hand man, Jebediah M. Grant, notably remarked, “Polygamy is alright when properly carried out...on a shovel!”¹⁸⁹ Such accounts unveil a complicated position of plural wives and portray them as duplicitous figures that freely championed a position they could not come to terms with in their personal lives .

The relationship between wives was frequently a tempestuous existence as each woman stumbled to understand her place within her husband’s world. Second, third and fourth wives were kept away from the first or “proper” wife. They hardly saw their husbands and lived as impoverished single parents or widows.¹⁹⁰ In truth, “wives with the same husband generally didn’t confide in each other or seek each other’s company. Although most tried to get along, they were indifferent to each other.”¹⁹¹ The first wives considered polygamy a “religious burden that was best borne, in their view, by taking charge. Their superior tone and flippant references to their husband’s additional wives belie an underlying assumption that, as first wives, they were their husband’s real wives.”¹⁹² As the second wife to her husband, Mary Lois Walker Morris understood the pain her marriage had caused her

¹⁸⁷ Phoebe Woodruff, quoted in Harline, 78.

¹⁸⁸ Zina Young, quoted in Harline, 78.

¹⁸⁹ Carol Lynn Pearson, “The Celestial Law,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 27.

¹⁹⁰ Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 1.

¹⁹¹ Harline, 79.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 51.

husband's first wife when she wrote, "Nothing I could do [could] remove the sting that comes to the heart of a first wife when her husband enters into the order of plural marriage."¹⁹³ One first wife recorded her struggle to show kindness and even civility to her husband's second wife during the course of her marriage. "I tried to be a mother and a sister to her, but oh, it was hard. Many nights my pillow would be wet with grief...I was only human, though I knew the principle had been revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith and that it was true and sacred, it was almost more than I could endure; it came nearly to taking my life."¹⁹⁴

For Harline, and other researchers of emotionally charged experiences, what is not written can be just as informative as what is written. It is clear that some wives found writing about polygamy a minefield that they just couldn't navigate and they refused to be defined by their standing as one among many.¹⁹⁵ The diaries and personal correspondences of the Bennion brothers, John and Samuel, contain few references to their subsequent wives, their personal feelings, and the unimaginable effort it required to inhabit a high mountain desert while sustaining multiple households with different wives.

In actuality, when compared to the literature documenting the plural wives in the nineteenth century Latter-day Saint community, little attention has been directed to the non-elite husbands. A man who entered into plural marriage was generally a Church leader or had been asked to live the Principle by a Church authority. He was usually a prominent member of the community and as a polygamist, his status with God and man was automatically

¹⁹³ Milewski and Milewski, *Before the Manifesto*, 124.

¹⁹⁴ Lydia Ann Brinkerhoff, quoted in Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 97.

¹⁹⁵ Harline, 85.

elevated.¹⁹⁶ Harline observes that most of the husbands were “well-intentioned” and victims of a balance between “righteousness and sin, abundance and drought, obedience and willfulness, passion and awkwardness, convenience and inconvenience.”¹⁹⁷ In retrospect, it took an exhausting human toll on both the men and the women. John Hafen, a polygamist in Bunkerville, Nevada, wrote, “I complied with the celestial law of plural marriage in obedience to the Church authorities and because the command was divinely inspired. It cost me much heartache and sorrow and I have shed many tears over it.”¹⁹⁸

Whether the Principle was nothing more than a demanding commandment from God or “sexual dalliance clothed in divine sanction,” its theological roots shed light on its secret induction among the early Latter-day Saints.¹⁹⁹ Plural marriage was a way to interchange the core tenets of continuing revelation, eternal marriage, a restoration of all things and building the kingdom of God in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ. The initial, outraged reactions of the nineteenth century American population to the Church’s 1852 announcement did not echo the early Saints’ mixed response in Nauvoo. The freedom to practice in the Rocky Mountains yielded varied marital behaviors among the members who entered into it, the great majority of which did not fit the popular old-man-teenage-bride stereotype. Far from a one-size-fits all system, the institution of marriage among the early Saints fulfilled different purposes; a union for “time” or for “eternity” or for both. The system’s strongest public advocates guarded conflicted feelings in private and retrospective accounts diverged from cotemporary personal writings while what was left unsaid is just is

¹⁹⁶ Wyatt, “Mormon Polygyny in the Nineteenth Century,” 17.

¹⁹⁷ Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 49.

¹⁹⁸ John Hafen, quoted in Harline, 112.

¹⁹⁹ Harline, 7.

valuable as the written history. The following chapter will include an analysis of primary sources that demonstrate a change in doctrine and the modernization of the Latter-day Saint community that led to the decline of plural marriage before 1880 and its defense under heightened federal pressure.

CHAPTER 3

A DOGGED RESOLVE

We never should have thought of practicing this principle if God had not revealed it from the heavens and commanded it, and we must stand by it and by every principle that He has revealed.

George Teasdale

For 50 years, the practice of plural marriage, openly and secret, in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints resembled a rickety, old, carnival roller coaster ride. After the initial jump out of the station and the first steep incline, the Principle advanced forth through a series of turns and loops with the occasional upslope rise in popularity that, at last, ended with a steady slide back to where it started. It was a ride that participants had to be urged on and coaxed off. Scholars agree that, minus the handful of short-lived spikes, plural marriage followed a path of persistent decline.

Klaus Hansen sees the 1890 Manifesto as evidence of the community's acceptance of "economic individualism and the monogamous nuclear family."²⁰⁰ The Manifesto, however, was not issued until after an intense period of external opposition that occurred just as polygamy was on its way out the door. This chapter will explore the scholarship on the gradual decline of plural marriage and my findings from primary sources that both enhance

²⁰⁰ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 177.

scholarly arguments and demonstrate how the federal and state pressure of the 1880s worked to prolong polygamy in the end.

Modernization and Marriage for Love

A driving impetus to polygamy's collapse was the Latter-day Saints' adaption to modernization and the American value of romantic love. Long before the American Revolution, marital behavior adapted to the necessity of creating progeny and securing patrimonial wealth. Love was considered a possible byproduct of a good marriage but wasn't a determining factor.²⁰¹ By the nineteenth century, emotional fulfilment and connectivity had begun to replace the marital motives of wealth and security. And when Brigham Young and the Mormon pioneers set foot in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, for the rest of the country, the preference to marry for love had become the norm. Sociologist Stephanie Coontz asserts that "By the middle of the nineteenth century there was near unanimity...that the love-based marriage, in which the wife stayed home protected and supported by her husband, was a recipe for heaven on earth."²⁰²

Marital practices among the Latter-day Saints, for a time, contradicted the notion of marriage based upon individual choice and companionate love for reasons pertaining to theology and the privilege of independence. Professor Kathleen Flake, in her article "The Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage," contends that the early Saints' "rejection

²⁰¹ Kathleen Flake, "'The Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage'" (2009). Arrington Annual Lecture. Paper 15. Utah State University Press, accessed November 23, 2020, https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_lecture/15

²⁰² Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking Adult, 2005), 163.

of romantic marital norms” was more than a “psychological defense” in response to the reality of sharing one’s husband and his frequent absences.²⁰³ Plural wives adapted to plurality by focusing their sights on the future eternities while guarding their hearts for the present, temporary existence. Paula Harline expounds further that the plural wives “tried to think of marital love differently, rather than finding one’s soul mate,” they sought to find a “righteous person who shared their beliefs.” In the end, they fostered an “environment of inclusivity” and strived to “undo the assumption that the husband was the center of their lives.”²⁰⁴

While plural wives approached their marital choices with dutiful pragmatism, their single American counterparts “became more cautious in their choice of a spouse because marriage was seen as more of a partnership and courtship became a time to prove the existence of compatibility.”²⁰⁵ In her study of polygamous wives’ personal writings, Harline concludes that nineteenth century assumptions of “love-based marriage didn’t disappear with the coming of polygamy.”²⁰⁶ Despite their best efforts to reconcile their inner longings for exclusivity with obedience to an exalting principle, most found it difficult to manage the reality. In the words of Harline, “even while living polygamy, inertia pulled wives back to their cultural DNA...Adam and Eve alone,” and “most polygamous wives’ personal writings provide evidence of the underlying tension between expectations of monogamy and the practice of polygamy.”²⁰⁷ That, ultimately, plural wives admired love-based, monogamous

²⁰³ Flake, “The Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage,” 3.

²⁰⁴ Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club*, 73.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

relationships from a distance is indicated by Dr. Martha Hughes Cannon when she wrote of the “joy and comfort” it was to witness those in exclusive, traditional marriages.²⁰⁸

The primary sources in this study reflect the scholarly consensus that at the outset, plural wives prioritized the charge to create bodies for righteous spirits waiting to come to earth over their own “cultural DNA,” but, over time, their priorities shifted to reflect those of the general public. In a letter by Belinda Pratt, plural wife of apostle Parley Pratt, to her sister in New Hampshire, the early attitudes of the first generation polygamists toward marriage and sex are reported to have been concerned with the “multiplying of our species.”²⁰⁹ Pratt outlines “nature’s law,” or the principle objective for the institution of marriage, “the rearing and training of children,” and presents a detailed argument for abstinence during “certain seasons,” presumably menstruation and pregnancy. Her reasons coincided with prevailing Victorian beliefs while intertwining Biblical references to the righteousness of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob and other figures who practiced polygamy and remained in favor with God. “Indulgences should not be merely for pleasure, or wanton desires, but mainly for the purpose of procreation...polygamy then, as practiced under the Patriarchal law of God, tends directly to the chastity of women, and to sound health and morals in the constitutions of their offspring.”²¹⁰ Written in 1854, two years after the Church went public with plural marriage, the Pratt letter reveals the Latter-day Saints’ embrace of contemporary attitudes concerning sex and an incongruity in their approach to marriage out of duty to procreate and not for romantic love.

²⁰⁸ Harline, 78.

²⁰⁹ Belinda Marden Pratt, *Defence of Polygamy, by a Lady in Utah, in a Letter to Her Sister in New Hampshire* (Forgotten Books, 2017), 4.

²¹⁰ Pratt, 14.

In concurrence with Harline's findings, the editors and contributors to the *Woman's Exponent* display a shift from their primary position of marriage for multiplicity and obedience, to marriage for love. In the 1880s, especially, submissions from the average reader reflect an emphasis on love, mutual affection and attraction over other motives when entering into a marital union. One anonymous article reads, "A woman who has never really known the tenderness of intensely loving has scarcely arrived at the highest degree of earthly happiness. When one has realized the power of that true and constant love which attracts one to the opposite sex, then the desire of becoming united through the marriage ceremony naturally follows."²¹¹ Another submission not only urges the Latter-day Saint women to place love before marriage, but counsels that marriage without love is a sin. "Love in this, as in all God's institutions characterize the union of husband and wife: without mutual love the relation will be an unhappy one and so defect the object God had in view. Where this love does not exist marriage is virtually a sin..."²¹²

Rejection, Heartache and Financial Expectations

The writers for the *Woman's Exponent* were also concerned with young women either marrying men outside the community, men inside the community who were not able to marry in the temple, meaning that they did not faithfully follow the tenets of the Church, or, they did not want to marry at all for fear that their husband might at some future time take another wife. Female Church leaders in the Northern Utah region of Cache Valley counseled the youth to "beware of those who have no faith in God or who speak lightly of sacred

²¹¹ "A Few Thoughts," *Woman's Exponent* 13 (June 1, 1884).

²¹² S.W. Richard, "Woman," *Woman's Exponent* 17 (December 15, 1888).

ordinances” when choosing a husband.²¹³ Others warned young women to stay away from “gentile” men or else they risk a denial of blessings.²¹⁴ Several articles suggest that the possibility of plurality deterred some from marrying within their faith or that others were drawn to partners who could not enter into the temple and therefore be disqualified from the possibility of polygamy. “There are some who will not marry a Mormon for fear he will get more wives.”²¹⁵ Frequent contributor M. E. Teasdale elaborated further, “I know that some of my young sisters would rather marry a young man with bad habits than one, who is religious for fear he would some time take another wife.”²¹⁶ The preference for a husband with “bad habits” over one with a deeper dedication to the Church but with the chance of polygamy acknowledges a divergence from the early plural wives who honored duty and eternal blessings over romantic love and assured monogamy.

The women of the *Woman’s Exponent* weren’t the only ones aware of the evolving attitudes within the community. Charles C. Rich, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, sermonized that “Some persons rush into marriage hastily and inconsiderately with no other consideration than that they call love, which frequently brings misery and unhappiness...Young folks generally marry because they love, sometimes because they are pretty.”²¹⁷ Both the writers in the *Woman’s Exponent* and the Church leadership, through articles and sermons, recognized a shift in the youth’s approach to marriage that contrasted

²¹³ “A Circular,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12 (April 1, 1884).

²¹⁴ “To The Girls,” *Woman’s Exponent* 13 (June 15, 1884).

²¹⁵ Mary, “Pipsey Papers,” *Woman’s Exponent* 8 (January 15, 1880).

²¹⁶ M.E. Teasdale, “Correspondence,” *Woman’s Exponent* 17 (July 1, 1888).

²¹⁷ Charles C. Rich, *Journal of Discourses* 19 (1877): 161–68.

with the earlier, first generation views and factored into the overall decline of plural marriage.

The literature, most especially in recent decades, concedes that the Principle was accepted as a higher, holier law, but, in the words of Kimball Young, “was neither the horrible system pictured by anti-Mormons nor the marital bed of roses alleged by Church officials.”²¹⁸ In truth, it fell somewhere in the middle and was never fully embraced nor accepted by the Church general membership. Despite consistent ecclesiastical endorsement, the majority of the Saints resisted putting the belief into practice. That they did not understand it is evident in sermons and in the *Woman’s Exponent*. Elder Joseph F. Smith, future Church president, counseled a congregation in Salt Lake City, “I fancy sometimes that not only is the world without knowledge in relation to this principle, but many who profess to be Latter-day Saint are far from possessing a correct understanding of it...those who embrace the gospel should obtain a knowledge in relation to this matter.”²¹⁹ From the *Woman’s Exponent*, a correspondent concurs with Smith’s oration in that she also believed that Church membership lacked a full comprehension of the Principle and that it was also creating problems within the community. “Plural marriage presents itself now to the public in the form of a living problem and it is one that puzzles and perplexes this generation.”²²⁰

In conjunction with a general disinterest in understanding plural marriage, let alone practicing it, there was some doubt as to its divine origin. In 1866, apostle Amasa Lyman quoted another member when attempting to encourage faith in the Principle, but, in the end,

²¹⁸ Young, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?*, 81.

²¹⁹ Joseph F. Smith, *Journal of Discourses* 20 (July 7, 1878): 24–31.

²²⁰ “The Patriarchal Order of Marriage,” *Woman’s Exponent* 7 (December 1, 1878).

highlighted a nagging disbelief that prevailed in many hearts and minds. The uncertain congregant told Elder Lyman that the people “should have no objections to a plural marriage if we could only believe that it was right.”²²¹ Brigham Young further recognized a wavering of faith in the practice when he said, “It is in the hearts of many to wish that the doctrine of polygamy was not taught and practiced by us.”²²² The *Woman’s Exponent* warned of the rising generation’s ridicule and of a growing opinion that it was merely a failed social experiment from the mind of man. In 1882, one contributor wrote, “There is a disposition among some of our young people to deride and deny the divine origin of that principle; trying to make themselves believe that man was the originator.”²²³ And again from the *Exponent* in 1885, there are “those who claim to be Latter-day Saints that are in doubt about the principle of plural marriage being the revealed will of God.”²²⁴

The hesitancy of the younger crowd to embrace polygamy was not a singular occurrence for the second and third generation Saints and prompted much censure from Church authorities. The apostle Heber C. Kimball, three years after Elder Pratt’s public admission, complained to a group in Salt Lake Valley, “I wish more of our young men would take to themselves wives of the daughters of Zion, and not wait for us old men to take them all...Go ahead, young gentlemen...fill the mountains and the earth with righteous inhabitants.”²²⁵ Their uncertainty was compounded by open derision from some Church officials who were expected to respect and live the Principle. Months before Kimball’s

²²¹ Amasa Lyman, *Journal of Discourses* 11 (April 5, 1866): 198–208.

²²² Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 11 (1866): 266–72.

²²³ Mary F., “The Patriarchal Order of Marriage,” *Woman’s Exponent* 10 (January 15, 1882).

²²⁴ S.F.A., “Some Facts Plainly Set Forth,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14 (1885).

²²⁵ Heber C. Kimball, *Journal of Discourses* 3 (October 6, 1855): 123–25.

charge to the young men, Brigham Young called out a Latter-day Saint bishop who bluntly “laughed at and ridiculed” the practice of plural marriage in front of guests at his home.²²⁶

It did not help that many Church officials themselves, including John Taylor, Brigham Young’s predecessor, often admitted their own concerns over the Principle. In 1866, Elder Amasa Lyman conceded that “If I had been talked to about the plurality of wives when I was baptized into the Church, the Lord may know, but I do not know what I would have done.”²²⁷ President John Taylor acknowledged his disbelief and the practice’s challenge to, what Harline terms, his “cultural DNA.” “I had always entertained strict ideas of virtue and I felt as a married man that this was to me an appalling thing to do. The idea of my going and asking a young lady to be married to me, when I had already a wife! It was a thing calculated to stir up feelings from the innermost depth of the human soul.”²²⁸ The hesitancy of the youth in subsequent generations, the self-doubt, skepticism and admittance of uneasiness by Church leaders all contributed to the Principle’s lack of popularity and slow decay.

These primary sources correlate with the argument advanced by Daynes, Ivins, Shippis, Foster and others that there was a steady decline in plural marriage during its lifespan. Yet, perhaps the greatest contributing factor to its unpopularity is the difficult experience of the plural wives. The women in the *Woman’s Exponent* staunchly defended plural marriage, but the nature of their arguments and their reasoning shifted dramatically as will be discussed in greater depth at the end of this chapter. Church leaders in the *Journal of*

²²⁶ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 3 (July 14, 1855): 264–68.

²²⁷ Amasa M. Lyman, *Journal of Discourses* 11 (April 5, 1866): 198–208.

²²⁸ John Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 24 (November 30, 1882): 227–35.

Discourses recognized the hardship for the women of entering into plural marriage. In 1856, Brigham Young spoke of the “perfect flood of tears” from the plural wives and told of men coming to him and saying, “My wife, though a most excellent woman, has not seen a happy day since I took my second wife.”²²⁹ The change in attitudes toward marriage and sex may have occurred gradually, but the heartache of nonexclusive emotional and sexual fulfillment lingered constantly off the record. Sociologist Lester F. Ward observed that “the greatest check on the institution was the jealousy of the women.”²³⁰

One final component of the demise of polygamy was the economic strain and raised financial expectations for both the men and the women. When the Saints set down roots in the Intermountain West, the practice of plural marriage wasn’t the only institution that contributed to a group cohesiveness. They built a communal utopia that emphasized individual stewardship and commonality. One’s surplus was to be donated to the Church to be then divided out among the poor and the needy.²³¹ Every man owned property or managed property and was expected to use an honest work ethic to increase and/or improve his stewardship while using the property to produce a living for himself and his family. For a time, this communitarian experiment thrived on a frontier landscape where land was plentiful and isolation from outsiders fostered trust in the Church allocation of resources.²³² However, after the coming of the railroad and mining ventures in the region, increased commerce and dealings with outsiders forced the Saints’ careful isolation to crumble. By 1890, these

²²⁹ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 4 (September 21, 1856): 51–57.

²³⁰ Lester F. Ward quoted in, Young, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?*, 80.

²³¹ Robert V. Hine, John Mack Faragher, and Jon T. Coleman, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 277.

²³² Victor L. Brown, “The Law of Consecration - Victor L. Brown,” *BYU Speeches* (blog), accessed August 25, 2020, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/victor-l-brown/law-consecration/>.

“United Orders,” as they were called, had closed or transitioned to private business entities. The economy adapted to include industrial and manufacturing developments and, as Klaus J. Hansen observed, the Saints soon were “internalizing the individualistic, competitive values of a capitalistic society.”²³³

One ramification to the United Order breakdown was higher expectations of young women for future husbands who could provide well. Gone were the days of living a hand-to-mouth existence with two or three families squeezed into a simple frontier home. As the economy in Utah flourished, prospective plural and monogamous couples came to require greater financial security than their parents had known.²³⁴ When one poor polygamist commenced courtship for a second wife, his first wife wrote that her “husband had no business marrying another wife when he couldn’t support one.”²³⁵ Another wife divorced her husband because he couldn’t take care of her or their children. “My trouble wasn’t polygamy...he could not support me and I could not endure it because I was ambitious for myself and children.”²³⁶

These raised financial expectations in marriage did not go unnoticed by Church authorities or by the women from the *Woman’s Exponent*. In both sources, it was the young men who were mainly chastised for putting off marriage due to monetary limitations. Apostle George A. Smith remarked in 1867 that the “majority prefer to buy everything that is imported. Our young men are afraid to get married because they cannot afford to buy all

²³³ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 161.

²³⁴ Hansen, 175.

²³⁵ Mrs. Terry quoted in, Young, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?*, 133.

²³⁶ Jessie L. Embry, “Polygamous and Monogamous Mormon Women: A Comparison,” in *Women In Utah History Paradigm Or Paradox?*, ed. Linda Thatcher and Patricia Lyn Scott (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2005), 19.

these trimmings.”²³⁷ As early as 1855, young men were shirking marital union, plural or otherwise, for financial reasons. Brigham Young noted to a gathering in Provo, Utah, “I know quite a number of men in this church who will not take any more women because they do not wish to take care of them.”²³⁸ Over twenty years later, Apostle Charles C. Rich sermonized to oppose these growing expectations: “Some people have extraordinary notions concerning marriage; they think they must have everything to start with; they don’t want to marry unless they have a carriage, horses, and servants, and many things besides...”²³⁹

Over at the *Exponent*, readers wrote in to complain about the growing materialism within the community; a stark contrast to those of the earlier generation who came to the valley with almost nothing. Shortly before taking the helm as Church President, Wilford Woodruff enclosed an epistle to the *Woman’s Exponent*, in which he further criticized the youth for postponing matrimony until they accumulated wealth.

The institution of marriage in some communities of which we read is falling into disrepute. It is alleged that there is a growing tendency in this direction among us. The cause is doubtless traceable to the increase of wealth and disinclination of young men to take upon them the burdens of a wife and family. As we depart from the simplicity of early days, we may naturally expect that this tendency will increase as young men may be restrained from offering marriage to young ladies unless they can give them something like as comfortable a home as they enjoy under their parents’ roof.²⁴⁰

Church leadership alarm at a shift in values, due to the departure “from the simplicity of early days,” underlies the contribution of the community’s disrupted isolation and breakdown of the United Orders to the dwindling of Church-sanctioned polygamy.

²³⁷ George A. Smith, *Journal of Discourses* 12 (1867): 144.

²³⁸ Brigham Young, July 14, 1855.

²³⁹ Charles C. Rich.

²⁴⁰ Wilford Woodruff, “An Epistle,” *Woman’s Exponent* 16 (October 15, 1887).

Quantitative Evidence

Aside from these primary sources, quantitative data analysis of polygamous marriages over the course of its half-century lifespan matches my findings. Kathryn Daynes's study of polygamous unions in the central Utah community of Manti shows a significant decline, albeit an uneven one. Though polygamous marriages were rarely, officially documented, Daynes pieced together family group records, Church membership records, cemetery records and marriage licenses. Focusing on a single community that was settled early (1849) and without unmanageable growth enabled Daynes to produce a more complete data set of the change in marriage and divorce patterns over time.²⁴¹ Though Daynes acknowledges that an extensive data set from one, single Latter-day Saint community may not represent the entire population, such figures do represent a living and complete community and reveal more than personal accounts alone.²⁴²

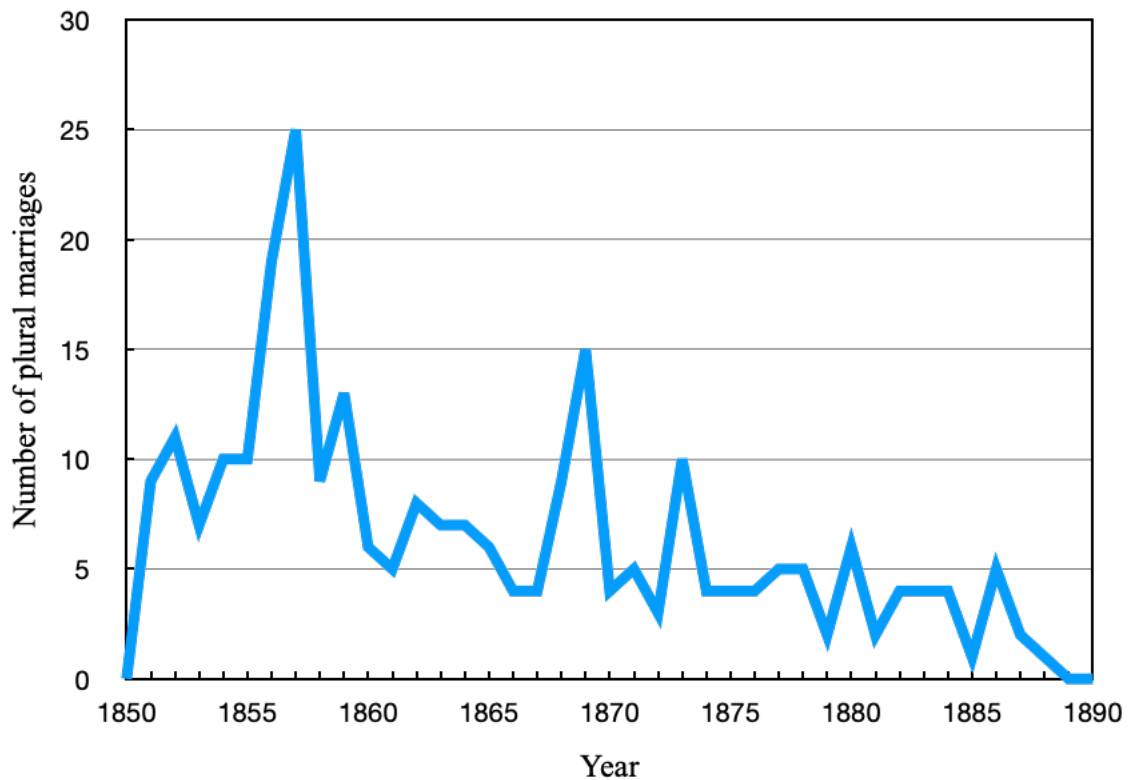
Daynes's numbers reflect other scholars' conclusions, that of plural marriage as a gradual downtrend with short-lived increases from time to time. Stanley Ivins' work explained these sporadic bursts as "some revivalist activity within the church or with some menace from without." Of particular note are Ivins's interpretations for polygamous marriage spikes in 1862, 1874 and in the mid 1880s. These increases are attributed to anti-polygamist activity and legislation aimed at exerting federal authority over local affairs and eventually the entire organization of the Church. The Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862, which made polygamy illegal, the 1874 Poland Act, which redefined the jurisdiction of Utah courts, and the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882, which declared polygamy a felony and facilitated

²⁴¹ Daynes, 9.

²⁴² Daynes, 8.

harsher and expedient prosecutions, all coincided with cursory yet marked increases in plural marriages.²⁴³ Ivins's data research connected the occasional spikes with federal opposition, while the arguments presented here will explain, from a doctrinal standpoint, why such a correlation existed.

Table 2. Plural Marriages Performed Yearly in Manti, Utah, 1850 -1890.²⁴⁴



The Doctrinal Evolution

Absent in recent literature of plural marriage's steady decline is the doctrinal evolution of the Principle as taught by Church authorities, starting from the early days of

²⁴³ Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," *Western Humanities Review* 10 (Summer 1956): 231–32.

²⁴⁴ Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910*, 102.

Nauvoo to the 1890 Manifesto which marked the end of Church-sanctioned polygamous marriages. Theologian historians have debated whether or not plural marriage was a requirement for exaltation or if polygamy was only one type of celestial marriage. Daynes and Foster contend that monogamous marriages were also considered as being as exalting as plural marriage, while Talbot argues that, leading up to 1890, the use of the term “celestial marriage” was synonymous with the use of the term plural marriage; celestial, meaning a marriage relationship that would continue into the next life and qualify one to dwell again with God.²⁴⁵ Like other tenets of Latter-day Saint theology, the Principle was a doctrine that saw a progressive reconfiguration over the course of its institution and, like other teachings from Joseph Smith, was left for others to implement. In the beginning, the doctrine centered on the Old Testament patriarchs, the promise of glory and power in the hereafter and the mission of the Saints to bear and rear righteous children.

When Joseph Smith asked William Clayton to act as scribe for a revelation given him on the principle of eternal marriage and the plurality of wives on July 12, 1843, the subsequent document, known as Section 132 in The Doctrine and Covenants, would serve as a doctrinal blueprint from which Church leaders would draw upon as they sought to execute this new divine directive. Among other clarifications, the document outlined God’s purposes for allowing the Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to marry more than one woman. With stern warnings to heed the Lord’s counsel, the concept of marriage, “sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise,” in this life as a prerequisite for exaltation in the eternities was also introduced.²⁴⁶ Those who entered into this “new and everlasting covenant”

²⁴⁵ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 24–25.

²⁴⁶ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 132:26.

of marriage and did not live up to her or his obligations would not be rewarded in heaven, “...for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”²⁴⁷ Citing the Old Testament practice of plural marriage, the revelation exhorts Joseph Smith and his followers to “Go ye therefore, and do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved.”²⁴⁸

The links between eternal marriage, exaltation and plural marriage seemed clear to the early Church authorities as they tirelessly preached the Principle to the Saints. Starting with Orson Pratt’s announcement in 1852, sermons on polygamy in the 1850s and 1860s referenced Section 132’s instruction on the practice in the Old Testament as a requirement for exaltation. Pratt preached of the loss of eternal rewards to those who rejected it and the need for God to send righteous spirits to righteous homes. Abraham could not have attained the blessing of seed as “numerous as the sands of the sea” with but “one wife.”²⁴⁹ And, in tandem with other discourses on plural marriages in its early years, Pratt reminded the congregation of the dire consequences to anyone who failed to accept the Principle as the revealed will of God. “What will become of those individuals who have this law taught unto them in plainness, if they reject it? I will tell you: they will be damned.”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 132:4.

²⁴⁸ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 132:40.

²⁴⁹ Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” 60.

²⁵⁰ Pratt, 64.

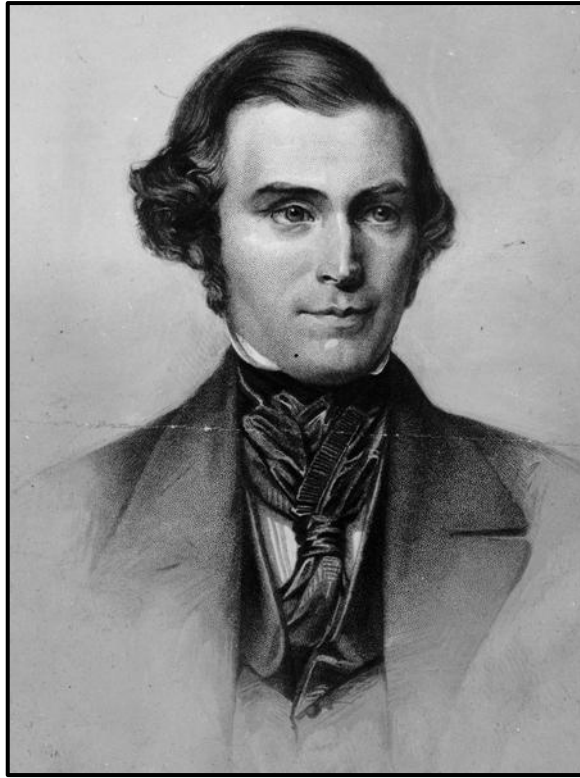


Figure 6. *Orson Pratt*, Engraving by Frederick Piercy, 1855. Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Staunch defender for and frequent orator of plural marriage.

These bullet points of Section 132 and Elder Pratt's first public sermon on polygamy were included in subsequent sermons by other Church figures. They followed Pratt's lead and incorporated the link to the Old Testament patriarchs, especially Abraham, then added Jesus Christ from the New Testament. In 1857, apostle Orson Hyde encouraged the Saints to take up the practice while making the argument that Jesus Christ may have been married himself, and to more than one wife. "If we are the children of Abraham, we will do the works of Abraham...even the wisest and best men – men after God's own heart, entered the most deeply into this practice. Nor was this practice limited to the days of the Old Testament...if

he [Jesus] was never married, his intimacy with Mary and Martha, and the other Mary also whom Jesus loved, must have been highly unbecoming and improper to say the best of it.”²⁵¹

The connection between Jesus Christ and the law of plural marriage was further extended by the apostle George A. Smith when he claimed that not only did Jesus never condemn the practice, but he was descended from a line of polygamists. “The Savior denounced adultery; he denounced fornication; he denounced lust; also divorce; but is there a single sentence asserting that plurality of wives is wrong? If so, where is it?...From whom did he descend? From the house of David a polygamist; and if you will trace the names of the families through which he descended you will find that numbers of them had a plurality of wives.”²⁵² Smith also contended that Jesus Christ was not the only teacher from the Bible who refrained from rebuking the proper practice of plural marriage, but so did all “inspired writers” and prophets from the Bible. For a religion that accepted the appearance of heavenly messengers on the earth once again with continuous revelation to lead and guide them, silence from above on the Saints’ institution of plural marriage was taken as further evidence that they possessed God’s approval.

Nonetheless, the community harbored a continual uneasiness for the practice and Church leaders responded with strong warnings not to neglect or treat the doctrine lightly. Brigham Young urged the Church to accept the Principle when he taught, “God never introduced the Patriarchal order of marriage with a view to please man in his carnal desires, nor punish females for anything which they had done; but introduced it for the express purpose of raising up to His name a royal Priesthood, a peculiar people...treat this revelation

²⁵¹ Orson Hyde, *Journal of Discourses* 4 (1857): 257–63.

²⁵² George A. Smith, *Journal of Discourses* 13 (1869): 37–42.

or any other revelation that the Lord has given, and deny it in your feelings and I promise you that you will be damned.”²⁵³

Calling upon the Saints to look to the eternal consequences of their approach to plural marriage, both the good and the bad, was a common thread in many sermons during the first two decades of open polygamy. Speaking of Joseph Smith, his brother Hyrum, and other Latter-day Saint men who had passed on, Heber C. Kimball noted the inconsistency in the hereafter should they be allowed the same eternal rewards as Abraham if they did not also enter into the order of plural marriage. “Do you suppose that Joseph and Hyrum and all those good men would associate with those ancient worthies, if they had not been engaged in the same practices? They had to do the works of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in order to be admitted where they are – they had to be polygamists in order to be received into their society.”²⁵⁴

The gap between the eternal rewards in store for those who lived polygamy and those who did not is a striking component of the doctrine that softened over time. Church authorities also made clear in the beginning years that polygamy was there to stay and not meant to be a temporary, social experiment. Heber C. Kimball noted that “The principle of plurality of wives never will be done away although some sisters have had revelations that, when this time passes away and they go through the veil, every woman will have a husband to herself.”²⁵⁵ Orson Pratt believed that throughout the history of humankind, plural marriage has been practiced by the faithful followers, and the adoption of the Principle by their

²⁵³ Brigham Young, July 14, 1855.

²⁵⁴ Heber C. Kimball, *Journal of Discourses* 4 (February 8, 1857): 221–26.

²⁵⁵ Heber C. Kimball, October 6, 1855.

community was an extension of that pattern. “God’s people, under every dispensation since the creation of the world, have, generally, been polygamists.”²⁵⁶ In later decades, the 1870s and 1880s, the language promising of eternal glory for those who lived the Principle slackened.

As early as 1866 the perception of plural marriage as a magic bullet for the highest degree of celestial glory had started to soften, beginning with President Brigham Young’s counsel on the saving power of faith and belief as well as action and behavior. “It is the word of the Lord, and I wish to say to you, and all the world, that if you desire with all your hearts to obtain the blessings which Abraham obtained, you will be polygamists at *least in your faith* (italics added), or you will come short of enjoying the salvation and glory which Abraham has obtained.”²⁵⁷ Here Young opened the door to those committed Saints who accepted the theology but who did not enter into its practice for whatever reason. President Young’s predecessor, John Taylor, elaborated on the distinction between celestial marriage and plural marriage. “God has revealed, through His servant Joseph Smith, something more...He has revealed unto us the law of celestial marriage, *associated* with which is the principle of plural marriage.”²⁵⁸ That plurality was being replaced by eternity and considered a constituent of celestial marriage and not its ideal form is further enhanced by submissions in the *Woman’s Exponent*. “Latter-day Saints regard plural marriage as an *extension* of all the privileges and good results arising from single marriage,” and “The world may not receive the glorious doctrine of eternal matrimony by which husbands and wives are

²⁵⁶ Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* 13 (1869): 183–96.

²⁵⁷ Brigham Young, 1866.

²⁵⁸ John Taylor, November 30, 1882.

made one forever, nor the principle of plural marriage, which is an essential part of the doctrine.”²⁵⁹

The Principle underwent a transformation from an absolute exigency for the highest degree of celestial glory, to an *extension* and *essential part* of the doctrine and not the only marital mandate revealed by God. Brigham Young admitted to a gray area in the principle of celestial marriage for those who chose to only marry one wife. “Now, where a man in this Church says, ‘I don’t want but one wife, I will live my religion with one,’ he will perhaps be saved in the celestial kingdom.”²⁶⁰ This variance from Church leaders’ original stance was compounded by Joseph F. Smith when he posed this question and reply to a crowd in Salt Lake City: “How will it be with good men who believe the doctrine, but are prevented, or cannot enter into the practice of it? I reply that every man and woman will receive all that they are worthy of, and something thrown in perhaps, on the score of boundless charity of God.”²⁶¹

It may be appropriate to note that the Latter-day Saint community, then and now, takes comfort in their belief in a God who is inclusive and nondiscriminatory. “Hath he commanded any that they should not partake of his salvation? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but he hath given it free for all men...”²⁶² The exclusivity, among other aspects, of the doctrine surrounding the plurality of wives was confusing and contradictory to the movement’s message of every human being a child of God, with a place prepared for them in

²⁵⁹ Hannah T. King, “The Ladies Mass Meeting,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14 (March 15, 1886); “Joseph Smith and Celestial Marriage,” *Woman’s Exponent* 15 (June 15, 1886).

²⁶⁰ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 16 (1873): 160–71.

²⁶¹ Joseph F. Smith.

²⁶² *The Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 26:27.

heaven. It was demographically impossible for everyone to live the Principle, and, in hindsight, completely inevitable that the focus would adapt to one of inclusive fairness that complimented their eternal salvation narrative. George Q. Cannon, apostle and delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives for the territory of Utah, recognized the worthiness of single and monogamous men and women who might also be admitted into the highest kingdom of God.

I believe there are very excellent, very worthy, very true, and very faithful Latter-day Saints of both sexes who have not entered into the practice of plural marriage...I am perfectly satisfied there are men who will be counted worthy of that glory who never had a wife; there are men probably in this world now, who will receive exaltation, who never had a wife at all, or probably had but one.²⁶³

In conjunction with the softening of the language and the ambiguity between the two terms plural marriage and celestial marriage, Church authorities adjusted the finality or permanence of the practice to a system meant only as a temporary measure. George Q. Cannon spoke of the Principle's restraints and inability to withstand a prolonged duration. "I do not wish to convey the idea that plural marriage can be universal. In the very nature of things as I have often said, it is impossible...it cannot therefore be practiced without limit among us."²⁶⁴ From the *Woman's Exponent*, a statement from the First Presidency, the top governing body of the Church, read, "We never have believed or taught that the doctrine of celestial marriage was designed for universal practice."²⁶⁵

²⁶³ George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 23 (October 8, 1882): 217–82; George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 22 (October 31, 1880): 120–32.

²⁶⁴ George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 24 (June 25, 1882): 38–50.

²⁶⁵ "Statement from the First Presidency," *Woman's Exponent* 14 (October 15, 1885).

Apostle Amasa Lyman also described the Principle as an ephemeral institution and preached of a scriptural pattern showing periods of both God-instituted polygamy and monogamy. Here, Lyman referred to the people of Nephi, a civilization from The Book of Mormon: “The Lord understood this when he talked to the people of Nephi: He told them they should have but one wife, and concubines they should have none...informing them that when He wanted His people to raise up seed unto Him, and if it was necessary they should have many wives He would command them.”²⁶⁶ The language, it would seem, evolved from expressions of hardline necessity, calling to mind the high standing of the Old Testament polygamists and the divine mandate to procreate, to a moderated tone of marital inclusivity and an interim practice, instituted on and off by God throughout human history.

A Shift in the Defense

Like the doctrine behind the practice, the premise of the Saints’ defense for it was another brick in the foundation that transformed over time. Throughout the archives of the *Woman’s Exponent* and in the *Journal of Discourses*, as well as in other personal documents, there exists evidence of a blanket rearrangement in the community’s underlying arguments for the Principle. In the final two decades of the practice, Church authorities focused on the movement’s constitutional rights, the hypocrisy of the lawmakers, America as a divinely preserved land, the principle of sacrifice and their belief in a God who allows His people to pass through the refiner’s fire in order test to their character and their faith. The women centered their defenses around these key components and were cognizant of their negative

²⁶⁶ Amasa Lyman, *Journal of Discourses* 11 (April 5, 1866): 198-208.

image in the court of public opinion. When federal opposition intensified in the 1880s, the “why” of their positions changed to reflect a community grappling with not only the defense of a single tenet but for their entire religion.

Almost from the beginning, the defenders of the Principle employed secular arguments, as well as theological ones, to bolster their reasoning. In the first public sermon, Orson Pratt declared that the practice of polygamy would guard their settlements and valleys against the “haunts of prostitution, degradation, and misery,” that so agitated the rest of American society.²⁶⁷ Belinda Pratt spoke of plural marriage’s natural elimination of prostitution from those nations who lived it. “A nation, organized under the law of the gospel, or in other words, the law of Abraham, and the patriarchs, would have no institutions tending to licentiousness; no adulteries, fornications, etc., would be tolerated. No houses, no institutions would exist for traffic in shame, or in the life blood of our fair daughters.”²⁶⁸ Those at the *Exponent* wrote of the independence and encouragement for “cultivation and development” offered to all women of Utah, including plural wives, “who, if they become wives in families where plural marriage exists, do so understandingly, and of their own free will, and of their own free will they could dissolve the bonds so accepted if they felt disposed.”²⁶⁹

As anti-polygamy legislation and subsequent federal prosecutions increased, the original, non-doctrinal arguments for plural marriage as a remedy for prostitution and as a door that provided greater freedom for wives who could get out if they wanted were brushed

²⁶⁷ Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” 61.

²⁶⁸ Pratt, *Defence of Polygamy, by a Lady in Utah, in a Letter to Her Sister in New Hampshire*, 7.

²⁶⁹ “Lady Lawyers,” *Woman’s Exponent*, October 1, 1872.

aside in favor of those that centered on religious freedom and the righteousness of their cause. Orson Pratt spoke of their First Amendment rights often when preaching about the Principle and assured the Saints of their constitutional protections.

Congress should not enact a law prescribing, for the people in any part of the Republic, a certain form in which the ordinance of marriage shall be administered. Why should they not do this? Because it is a violation of religious principles, and of that great fundamental principle in the Constitution of our country which provides that Congress shall make no law in regard to religious matters that would, in the least degree, infringe upon the rights of any man or woman in this Republic in regard to the form of their religion.²⁷⁰

In 1869, when defending the Principle, Pratt made clear the distinction between the Constitution and the actions of Congress. “The Constitution never granted power to Congress to prescribe what part of the Bible any people should believe in or reject; it never intended any such thing.”²⁷¹

When Chief Justice Waite handed down the majority opinion in *Reynolds v. United States* in 1879, Church authorities still clung to their belief that plural marriage was protected by the Constitution and their rhetoric shifted to include that of righteous indignation. In the middle of the Supreme Court deliberations, Elder Cannon proclaimed, “Let me tell you that wrong may prevail and right may apparently be crushed; but right must at last prevail and claim its own in spite of laws, of decisions, of mandates, and everything that man can utter.”²⁷² Three months later, Cannon delivered another address, warning the Saints of future opposition and reassuring them of polygamy’s divine origin. “If plural marriage be divine, as the Latter-day Saints say it is, no power on earth can suppress it.”²⁷³ If the highest court in

²⁷⁰ Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* 16 (August 31, 1873): 171–85.

²⁷¹ Orson Pratt, 1869.

²⁷² George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 20 (April 6, 1879): 195–205.

²⁷³ George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 20 (July 20, 1879): 268–77.

the land wouldn't vindicate the Saints then they would find their justification from an even higher power.

Latter-day Saint authorities couldn't fathom how quickly the hammer of effective legislation materialized after *Reynolds v. United States* in the early 1880s. From their vantage point, the hypocrisy of federal lawmakers in condemning plural marriage was astounding and only served to embolden the polygamists and their wives while uniting the Church in a concerted effort to defend all the principles of their faith, especially polygamy. Elder Orson Hyde, in his last discourse before his death in November of 1878, condemned the United States government and its attempts to abuse the Latter-day Saint community. "The government of the United States, on paper, is an institution approaching as near perfection as any government ever ordained by man; but when its administration drifts into the hands of unscrupulous and dishonest politicians, it becomes an engine of oppression and very unequal in its bearings."²⁷⁴

Church leaders and women from the *Exponent* criticized the men of Congress, men whom they believed to be open adulterers who engaged in shameless, lascivious behavior. President John Taylor spoke of congressional duplicity after the passing of the Edmunds Act of 1882 which effectively disenfranchised and barred from public office any man who cohabitated with more than one wife and any woman who cohabitated with an already married man. "Suppose some of those who practiced this thing were placed under such a law, how would it operate with them? Why several members of Congress have said that if the Edmunds law had been made applicable to adulterers, and men had to become their own

²⁷⁴ Orson Hyde, *Journal of Discourses* 20 (November 3, 1878): 97–101.

accusers, it would unseat three fourths of the members of Congress.”²⁷⁵ The *Woman’s Exponent* expressed equal disdain for the supposed “Christian” men in federal government. “The polygamy of Utah is doing no harm to the United States...the difference between the Mormons and the Christian statesmen is that Mormons marry their mistresses, the Congressmen don’t.”²⁷⁶

In addition to their disgust and distrust of Washington politicians, the Saints understood a part of their responsibility in the newly centennial nation was to defend the democratic government and sustain the U.S. Constitution. Convictions within the Church have long held that God preserved America as a “choice land” and aided the Founding Fathers in their fight for independence and the establishment of The United States of America for the purpose of bringing about the restoration of Jesus Christ’s New Testament Church through a chosen oracle; Joseph Smith. Elder George Q. Cannon reiterated this principle at an annual conference in Salt Lake City: “The Latter-day Saints or ‘Mormons’ as we are called, expect it to be their destiny to uphold constitutional liberty on this continent, and to preserve our government and the forms thereof from overthrow and destruction.”²⁷⁷

Four years later, Cannon likened the Saints’ experience with their antagonists in Congress to the New England colonists and their oppression under British rule. “Read the history of New England and you will see that we are passing through precisely the same training that the colonists there did. It developed them, and was the means of making them the great people that they have since become.”²⁷⁸ By drawing parallels to the colonists’

²⁷⁵ John Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 23 (October 8, 1882): 257–70.

²⁷⁶ “The Mormon Female,” *Woman’s Exponent* 7 (February 1, 1879).

²⁷⁷ George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 20 (April 7, 1878): 1–8.

²⁷⁸ George Q. Cannon, June 25, 1882.

experience before and during the American Revolution, Cannon highlights how federal pressure against polygamy induced the Saints to dig in their heels in the face of oppression and not capitulate to the demands of an unjust Act of Congress; as did the American revolutionaries against an Act of Parliament. It was their God-given duty to defend the U.S. Constitution and it was their New England heritage to resist prejudicial congressional legislation.

Opposition in All Things

Elder Cannon's oration also accentuates another dominant principle in Latter-day Saint theology that explains why the Church resisted anti-polygamy activity; the belief in sacrifice. Joseph Smith taught, "Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation."²⁷⁹ The Saints view the challenges and trials of life as necessary for one's eternal preparation to meet and dwell with God. Resistance to building the kingdom of God on the earth is also expected as stated in an oft quoted scripture from The Book of Mormon: "For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things."²⁸⁰ Sermons in the 1880s were filled with reminders to this principle of sacrifice and with admonitions to the Saints to remain true to the faith. Elder Cannon observed, "No doubt the Lord will require us to pass through and endure ordeals that will test our faith to the uttermost...no great work like that in which we are engaged, can be established in the earth, in the present condition of mankind at least,

²⁷⁹ Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co, 1997), 590.

²⁸⁰ *The Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 2:11.

without great sacrifice on the part of those connected with it.”²⁸¹ When referencing the *Reynolds v. U.S.* decision, Cannon further declared, “Such a proceeding only had the tendency to make people cling to their faith and we will to suffer for it.”²⁸²

A correspondent for the New Orleans newspaper the *Times-Democrat* visited Salt Lake City in 1882 and recorded her treatment by and opinion of the “Mormon people.” Mrs. Elizabeth Saxon’s account, later published in the *Woman’s Exponent*, took note of their religious devotion and of the precarious political situation. “They hold their religious tenets with a dogged resolve, and they claim all as under revelation...Persecutions they expect from every quarter, and some of them glory in it, for it more firmly unites the church and renews the zeal of the lukewarm, binding them as a people more closely together.”²⁸³

This “dogged resolve” originated from more than a desire to maintain an antiquated marital system. Indeed, the community perceived the opposition from anti-polygamy legislation and intensified federal prosecutions as an attack on their entire religion. Elder Cannon argued before a congregation in 1882 that, in the late 1830s, the Saints had been forcibly expelled from Caldwell County, Missouri, among other settlements, out of religious prejudice and not due to any specific practice. “Now whoever heard then of plural marriage? It was not practiced...The mob burned our houses and killed our cattle and destroyed our grain, not because of any feature of this kind, but because we were ‘Mormons,’ and believed in a form of religion that they did not believe in.”²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ George Q. Cannon, October 8, 1882.

²⁸² George Q. Cannon, July 20, 1879.

²⁸³ “Mrs. Saxon’s Letters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11 (January 1, 1883).

²⁸⁴ George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 24 (September 24, 1882): 99–109.

Starting at the top, Church leaders strongly counseled the Saints to be united and remain faithful under this cross they were asked to bear. President John Taylor told his followers, “We believe in celestial marriage, in celestial covenants, in men and women being united for time and all eternity. Are we going to suffer a surrender of this point? No, never! No, never! We intend to be true to our covenants in time and in the eternities to come.”²⁸⁵ From the women at the *Exponent* came a similar call to arms, “Sisters, shall we give up plural marriage or any other principle of Mormonism? No! No!”²⁸⁶ The messages were colored with a sense of urgency and reflected an all-or-nothing approach as outside pressure escalated. A member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated, “Can I afford to give up a single principle? I cannot. If I had to give up one principle, I would have to give up my religion.”²⁸⁷

The arguments from Latter-day Saint women navigated the same course set by their ecclesiastical leaders. In the beginning, they spoke of both the secular and doctrinal elements of plural marriage: a guard against prostitution, the means of raising up seed and building the kingdom of God, a system that fostered female independence, and a necessary ordinance for eternal salvation. By the end and like their male counterparts, the women centered their discourses on polygamy around their rights as citizens of the United States, a comparison between their experience and that of the early American colonists and a defense of their entire religion. The vernacular shifted from a promotion of the Principle to a defense of their

²⁸⁵ John Taylor, *Journal of Discourses* 23 (August 20, 1882): 235–41.

²⁸⁶ Mary Ferguson, “The Anti-Polygamy Petition,” *Woman’s Exponent* 7 (December 1, 1878).

²⁸⁷ George Teasdale, *Journal of Discourses* 25 (January 13, 1884): 13–22.

community and constitutional freedoms and from where they sat, it never had ever really been about plural marriage.



Figure 7. *Portrait of Emmeline B. Wells*. Photograph by C.M. Bell, 1879. Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. Emmeline Wells was an editor of the *Woman's Exponent*, a plural wife, advocate for national women's suffrage, and served as the fifth General Relief Society President, the organization that oversees all women ages 18 and older in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Publicly, plural wives were the most avid advocates and took umbrage at the popular perception of them as a docile, uneducated and suppressed minority. That they felt indignant about their public image is evidenced by an article published in July of 1883.

It seems a very common thing with people unacquainted with the facts to say, it is the ignorance of "Mormon" women that "keeps them in bondage," that "makes them submit to plural marriage;" when in truth the very contrary is the case. It is because of the intelligence they possess on subjects connected with

their existence here and hereafter, as well as that of their posterity and kindred, the hopes entertained, and the actual knowledge concerning the future that causes them to embrace a doctrine so unpopular and so objectionable in the eyes of the world.²⁸⁸

The isolation of the Rocky Mountains for the Latter-day Saint community was short-lived as American settlers pushed west and the railroad connected the East with the West, the urban with the rural. Previous scholarship concurs on a shift in attitudes toward romantic love and a move to modernization that raised financial expectations. That this shift was already in the works before the increase in outside pressure is furthermore evident in the *Woman's Exponent* and from ecclesiastical sermons in the *Journal of Discourses*.

Additionally, Church authorities' understanding of and stance on the doctrine of polygamy transformed from the first generation during the Nauvoo period, to the second and third generations in the Intermountain West. Commencing as an absolute necessity to be exalted in the next life, plural marriage was assumed to be synonymous with celestial marriage. In time, the language softened to include a more inclusive and practical approach that took into consideration one's willingness to live the Principle. It also evolved from a system never meant to be withdrawn to one that was commanded by God periodically throughout human history. This theological alteration was conducive to the decline of the practice because it lessened the celestial requirement and permanence of the Principle.

The shift in the language and premise of their arguments used by both Church leaders and the contributors to the *Woman's Exponent* explains why the federal pressure of the 1880s worked to perpetuate the practice. Advocates in both primary sources utilized theological and

²⁸⁸ "Is It Ignorance?," *Woman's Exponent* 12 (July 1, 1883).

secular positions to promote plural marriage, but the secular aspects gave way to defenses that included constitutional rights, religious liberties, congressional hypocrisy, the Latter-day Saint destiny to preserve American institutions and, for the women, a defense of their intelligence and independence. No strangers to opposition in all forms, an attack on one principle was viewed as an attack on all. The “dogged resolve” of the Latter-day Saint community in defending their religion from outside antagonists, in the end, worked to prolong the practice of plural marriage and not to extinguish it.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION & EPILOGUE

I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land.

President Wilford Woodruff

Conclusion

A developing and authentically American-made religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its impermanent practice of plural marriage remains a societal curiosity today. It is said of Joseph Smith that his name would “be had for good and evil among nations, kindreds, and tongues,” and that it would “be both good and evil spoken of among all people.”²⁸⁹ Those early and most faithful converts were approached with hesitancy as Smith endeavored to fulfill God’s command to institute a Biblical yet unfamiliar marital system. Following the martyrdom of their prophet, and a migration to the Rocky Mountains, the Latter-day Saints constructed a community of mountain and valley settlements. Isolation from outside influences and a Church-controlled legal system fostered the open practice of plural marriage as the Saints shaped their own cultural self-identity.

A practice which almost everyone within the community privately opposed,

²⁸⁹ Joseph Smith - History 1:33.

polygamy never did implant itself into the beating heart of the Saints. As the rest of the country looked on in disbelief and outrage, federal and state pressure increased over time. Yet, left alone, it would have faded out of mainstream tradition on its own. Changing attitudes concerning love and marriage, modernization and a shift toward a capitalist economy not to mention the arduous toll on the plural wives and their husbands all contributed to the waning of a marital system that went against their “cultural DNA.”

Analysis of ecclesiastical sermons from the *Journal of Discourses* (1854-1886) and the women’s newspaper, the *Woman’s Exponent*, (1872-1914) demonstrates evidence of a doctrinal evolution of plural marriage within a theological narrative. In the early years, polygamy was an absolute requirement for celestial exaltation in the hereafter and Church leaders believed a plurality of wives was not offensive to God, the Old Testament prophets or Jesus Christ in the New Testament.²⁹⁰ Those who rejected or blatantly disobeyed the Principle would meet dire consequences in the eternities. As more and more Church converts converged on Zion, with the passing of time, the language softened to describe plural marriage as an extension or feature of celestial marriage. Vernacular from the pulpit shifted to describe the Principle from a categorical prerequisite in order to obtain a place in God’s celestial kingdom to one way to enter therein with an emphasis on one’s willingness to accept the practice. Church authorities indicated that it was a temporary measure and referred to scriptural accounts where God instituted and forbid plural marriage among the righteous.

²⁹⁰ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that God, the Father, and Jesus Christ are two, separate beings; a distinction was made to clarify that neither showed disfavor in divine-sanctioned plural marriage.

Additionally, these primary sources explain why outside pressure on the Church to abandon the practice actually worked to prolong its sanction within the community. Early arguments in favor of plural marriage advocated a system that guarded against prostitution, afforded women more choices in a companion, encouraged activism outside the home, ennobled their duty to raise up a righteous generation on earth and promised blessings and future association with Abraham and other distinguished patriarchs. As federal opposition increased, the arguments made by ecclesiastical leaders and women of the Church altered to reflect a defense revolving around constitutional rights, religious freedom, a sanctimonious federal government, the Latter-day Saints' destiny to uphold the United States Constitution and outrage over the question of the plural wives' intelligence. Leaders exhorted the Church to remain steadfast in the face of opposition and reminded them of their covenants to make sacrifices for the Lord's kingdom. To defend their right to practice plural marriage meant to defend their right to practice their entire religion.

Earlier scholars have proved the steady decline of polygamy from 1850-1890 using quantitative data. Study of the teachings surrounding the Principle and the insights from the women explain why, over time, it would not be a permanent feature in the community. The doctrine equally accounts for the tenacious defense mounted by the Church during the federal opposition of the 1880s. Within the theological contours of a religion founded upon restorative principles and continuous revelation lies an explanation of human behavior.

Epilogue

When President Wilford Woodruff read aloud the document that would forbid any new plural marriages before the main body of the Saints in September of 1890, those present would remember a flood of mixed emotions; mainly those of relief and gratitude.²⁹¹ The night before, President Woodruff recorded in his journal, “I have arrived at a point in the history of my life as president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints where I am under the necessity of acting for the temporal salvation of the church.”²⁹² Plural marriage had become too high a price to pay for the dissolution of the Church. Under threat of the Cullum-Struble Bill, an act of Congress that would have disbanded the current territorial government and appointed a congressional commission to govern Utah while disenfranchising all members of the Church of Jesus Christ, the leadership finally submitted to federal demands.²⁹³

Historians have presented President Woodruff’s Manifesto as a climatic concession in exchange for statehood while others claim that quiet negotiations between Church and federal authorities had been taking place for some time. In 1889, President Woodruff told a reporter that he had refused to authorize any new plural marriages since succeeding John Taylor as Church President in 1887.²⁹⁴ Read attentively, the 1890 Manifesto contains language of certain restrictions already in place but, in the same breath, did not reverse the doctrinal position of plural marriage. President Woodruff referred to allegations by the Utah

²⁹¹ Shipps, “The Principle Revoked,” 71.

²⁹² Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journals*, ed. Scott Kenney, vol. 1, 6 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983).

²⁹³ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 158.

²⁹⁴ Embry, “Polygamous and Monogamous Mormon Women: A Comparison,” 6.

Commission to the Secretary of the Interior of plural marriages still being “solemnized and that forty or more such marriages [had] been contracted in Utah since last June or during the past year.” To these reports, President Woodruff responded, “We are not teaching polygamy or plural marriage, nor permitting any person to enter into its practice, and I deny that either forty or any other number of plural marriages have during that period been solemnized in our Temples or in any other place in the Territory.”²⁹⁵

At least by 1889, there existed a Church policy of no longer officially sanctioning or openly encouraging plural marriages. In fact, in the last half of the 1880s, very little was said of plural marriage over the pulpit other than the occasional encouragement to remain steadfast in the faith because of opposition to the Principle. Additionally, the *Woman's Exponent* delayed coverage of the Manifesto for a month, and, following the lead of the ecclesiastical authorities, published little mention of plural marriage or referenced the practice as a condition of the past.

Plural marriage, within the mainstream church, died a slow death, as slow as its introduction nearly 50 years earlier. Carmon Hardy argues that the reason the Principle was held onto with such tenacity for so long after the Manifesto was because of its intense emphasis and public presentation by Church leaders. “The cardinal significance early leaders granted plurality in their teachings, combined with spirited defenses of it, so gilded the doctrine that its enduring attraction was assured.”²⁹⁶ Hundreds of plural marriages were sanctioned by Church officials in Mexico, Canada and the United States from 1890 to 1904,

²⁹⁵ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Official Declaration - 1.

²⁹⁶ Carmon B. Hardy, “The Persistence of Mormon Plural Marriage,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44 (Winter 2011): 43–105, accessed September 8, 2020, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/docview/922580757?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo.

when President Joseph F. Smith released a “Second Manifesto,” strongly condemning those who continued to enter into new marriages and insisting that such unions were not recognized by the Church. In 1909, polygamous practitioners began to be excommunicated and no known plural marriages have been solemnized within the mainstream Church since 1910.²⁹⁷

Regardless, some dissenters still believed that plural marriage was an inflexible requirement for the righteous only and remained committed to keeping the Principle alive. In 1933, the First Presidency issued a harsh warning to all who ignored the Church’s position and further insisted that new plural relationships were adulterous, while any attempts to revive polygamy within the Church were not inspired by God.²⁹⁸ Like other ultra-traditionalist dissenters, Latter-day Saint fundamentalists focused on one specific tenet of the parent movement and contended that renunciation of the Principle only occurred because of yielding to secular pressure. The fundamentalist offshoots from the mainline Church of Jesus Christ burgeoned in the early twentieth century, according to Hardy, and “grew directly from memories of the high importance given polygamy by the old Church and the decades-long refusal to surrender it.”²⁹⁹

As the ranks of irreconcilables grew, several families relocated to isolated desert lands in southern Utah and northern Arizona. The most well-known call themselves “The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” claiming to be the true heirs of

²⁹⁷ Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom*, 159.

²⁹⁸ “An Official Statement from the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” *Deseret News*, June 17, 1933.

²⁹⁹ Carmon B. Hardy, “The Persistence of Mormon Plural Marriage,” 49.

early Latter-day Saint restoration.³⁰⁰ On occasion, satellite groups will experience run-ins with governmental agencies, such as the federal raid on the “Yearning for Zion” ranch outside El Dorado, Texas in 2008. There hundreds of women, children and men were forced out of their massive compound and their leaders tried and convicted of bigamy and sexual assault, including their prophet, Warren Jeffs.³⁰¹

Collectively, even with continual increase, these fundamentalists remain a miniscule fraction when compared to the expanding, monogamous mainstream Church. Counting more followers than either Episcopalians or Presbyterians, the Latter-day Saints are now a “formidable cultural force” in some parts of the country and the world and still experience irritation and frustration when confronted by the plural marriage of the past and their polygamous cousins in the present.³⁰² Yet, despite the Church’s best efforts to disentangle their history from the fundamentalists, there are some remaining fragments of the significant place plural marriage once occupied in Latter-day Saint theology. The most salient of those is the 1843 revelation to Joseph Smith on the plurality of wives found in section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, a book of scripture as widely referenced as The Old and New Testaments. It is often said that though the Church gave up the practice of the Principle, it did not reject its truthfulness and it might at some future date be implemented again.³⁰³ That President Woodruff did not introduce new precepts concerning celestial marriage or issue a

³⁰⁰ Carmon B. Hardy, 56.

³⁰¹ John MacCormack, “Yearning for Zion Ex-Polygamist Ranch in Texas Being Sold,” *San Antonio Express-News*, March 2, 2019, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/nation-world/2019/03/02/yearning-zion-ex>.

³⁰² Carmon B. Hardy, “The Persistence of Mormon Plural Marriage,” 60.

³⁰³ Carmon B. Hardy, 66.

statement assuring the Saints that the Principle would never again be required of them did not and does not escape the community.

Yet, the Church's position today has remained consistent with the guidance set in place 130 years ago. During a popular interview in 1998 between then Church President Gordon B. Hinckley and Larry King, President Hinckley asserted that those who practice polygamy today "have no connection with us whatever." Condemning those who disregarded the 1890 Manifesto and subsequent official injunctions he added, "it is not legal and this Church takes the position that we will abide by the law...It is in violation of the law. We have nothing to do with it. We are totally distanced from it...It is behind us."³⁰⁴

Such language is repeated on Church websites and by other authorities who seek to honor the sacrifices of the early converts but draw a distinct line between the mainstream denomination and those who refuse to give it up. This attempt to distance themselves from the polygamy of the fundamentalists often obfuscates the early Church's involvement with plural marriage in the nineteenth century. Not until recently has there been more transparency within the Church with the publication of specific essays and records dedicated to the historicity of the plural marriage period in Church history.³⁰⁵

For women within the community especially, the experience of the plural wives under the yoke of polygamy is an ominous chapter. Carol Lynn Pearson describes it in these terms,

³⁰⁴ Gordon B. Hinckley, Pres. Hinckley speaks out on live TV show, September 12, 1998, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/1998-09-12/pres-hinckley-speaks-out-on-live-tv-show-126495>.

³⁰⁵ "Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah," accessed September 14, 2020, /study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/plural-marriage-and-families-in-early-utah?lang=eng; *Volume, 1 The Standard of Truth, 1815-1846*, vol. 1, Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2018); *Volume 2, No Unhallowed Hand, 1846-1893*, vol. 2, Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2020).

“How Mormon women were made to feel under the trial of past polygamy and feel still under the fear of future polygamy is something that we have never looked in the face. It is a sad face... We must look without flinching if institutionally we are to heal.”³⁰⁶ Those of us willing to unbolt the past in the name of individual reconciliation must consider if the benefits of plural marriage, both perceived and actual, for the nineteenth century plural wife outweigh the confusion and discomfort it breeds for the twenty-first century Latter-day Saint. The 1890 Manifesto may have been the beginning of the end, but vestiges of plural marriage within Latter-day Saint history still exist in the hearts and minds of its literal and spiritual descendants.

³⁰⁶ Pearson, “The Celestial Law,” 29.

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